

Halo: Rise of the Empire

by theotherpianist

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Summary: After the end of the Great War the Human race thought it was done with war. They were wrong. When a mission to find two UNSC distress signals is launched, the UNSC suddenly becomes entangled in a war they never wanted to fight, be in, or witness: the dramatic power play that was the Clone Wars. For one Spartan, his legacy and story will begin in a galaxy far, far away.

## 1. Prologue, Chapter 1

\_Hello, this is \_\_\*\*theotherpianist\*\*\_\_.\_ \_I am thrilled to be able to share this with you at this time.\_ This is an idea I have had in the makings for a long time now, and only until recently have I attempted sharing it. Before you start reading there are a couple of things.\_

\_First, while researching for this I came across a load of things and similarities between my ideas and other things already published on fanfiction. Therefore, in the interest of avoiding plagiarism I have consulted with the various authors for permission to have their ideas used. I will obviously try and change the actual material but there are things that are the same. If you find something that has not been disclaimed, please let me know so I can rectify and fix my errors. Disclaimers at the end of each chapter. Special thanks to \_\_\*\*UH-60 NIGHTSTALKER, creamofwheat2311, and My Wunderwaffle iz missin \*\*\_\_for permissions and advice in getting started. \_

\_Second, I am broke, do not sue me.\_

\_Third, I am a \_\_\*\*new\*\*\_\_ writer. This is my first fanfiction. I welcome reviews but if you have something you don't like personally or a suggestion and you feel like you need to share it, please be nice about it. No flames please. \_

\_Fourth\_\_ \*\*: \*\*\_\_I fully anticipate that the quality of my writing \_\_\*\*will \*\*\_\_get better with time. Practice makes perfect after all.

Be patient and bear with me! All good things come to those who wait.

—

\_Fifth: (12/6/2015) Some people have drawn comparisons to this work and another work entitled \_\_\_\*\*'Fighting for a Purpose'\*\*\_\_ by\_\_\_\*\*ErttheKing\*\*\_\_. Please understand that I was not aware of this work at the time of publication. I'm working right now on tweaking my story to rid it of major parallels to \_\_\_\*\*'Fighting for a Purpose'\*\*\_\_\_. \_

\_Without further ado:\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Halo: Rise of the Empire<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>22:14:04 hours: November 20th, 2558<strong>

\*\*Location: Partially known, UNSC RESEARCH and EXPLORATION Department level 18, \*\*

\*\*HighCom Facility Bravo-6, UNSC/ONI HQ, Melbourne Australia \*\*

The conference room sat was filled with men and women in white dress uniform. They all sat uncomfortably. Nobody ever used this room. This room was only ever used when matters of the utmost secrecy and importance were discussed. Whispers were traded as to the nature of what they had been called here to discuss, others sipped coffee from Styrofoam cups nervously, a few even exchanged angry words about being summoned for an extra meeting at this time. They were still waiting for one more individual.

The nervous buzz died when an aged woman walked through the doors of the conference room with a trio of armed Spartans escorting her. They stopped outside the door and sealed it locking her within the room.

"Welcome Madam President." One of the older Admirals seated greeted her.

"Thank you Admiral Hood. I hope you'll excuse me for being late. I had other things that needed to be taken care of before coming here." President Ruth Charet said as she sat down in the seat indicated for her.

She gestured to her right to a woman of Turkish descent.

"Admiral Osman. Would you care to enlighten us on what this meeting was called for?" she asked gesturing to the somewhat new head of the Office of Naval Intelligence.

"Certainly." she gestured and a woman next to her stood up and approached the wall. The lights dimmed and a projector turned on illuminating the wall.

An image and projection of the Epsilon Eridani system appeared on screen. It zoomed in to focus on its main planet of Reach.

She began.

"You have been called here to be briefed on a series of developments that have enormous implications. Yesterday at noon early warning probes detected Slip-space activity in the Epsilon Eridani system. Ten minutes later a trio of Carriers operated by the Brute Terrorist Group "The Sons of Dosiak" attempted to siege the planet of Reach. They sent a message to Admiral Tchikova who was currently in system that he had thirty hours to pay a ransom fee or they would land troops and begin to reglaze the planet."

Mutters and whispers broke out but they were silenced.

"Admiral Tchikova refused and called for help." she continued as Red blips appeared on screen and encircled the planet. "-and with the help of a nearby fleet began engaging the Brutes." Blue blips appeared and began to approach the Brute pirates.

"A half hour into the battle reinforcements arrived for the Pirates. Tchikova lost several cruisers and a Carrier was disabled before more reinforcements from the nearest battlegroup arrived. The Sons of Dosiak engaged in boarding actions and destroyed several more ships."

A third of the blue ships winked out steadily with no loss among the Brutes.

Admiral Tchikova who was aboard the Punic class Carrier Minamoto was almost killed by a group of Insurrectionists that had disguised themselves aboard the ship. He was saved at the cost of being severely wounded. The Brutes also succeeded in infiltrating almost every vessel and eliminated those in command. It \*\*\*\* near well worked too. In the end the Brutes were surrounded and attempted a hasty slip-space jump away. Something happened and the Brute fleet was half teleported into oblivion."

"Did you say teleported?" someone from the back spoke up.

"I did." Osman said fixing her eyes on the Admiral who had asked the question.

A large purple disc popped up and most of the enemy disappeared.

"Question. Who's in command of the Dauntless right now?"

Osman's lip curled slightly. "Spartan William Gunther."

"What? Admiral Tchikova's pet project?"

"Spartans are soldiers. Not Admirals." Someone else shouted.

Osman silenced those in attendance with a single cough followed by an icy gaze.

"As unorthodox as Tchikova's choice was, he's been given strict orders to keep the ship in one piece until reinforcements arrive. Now, as I was saying about the battleâ€" "

"Admiral Osman, with all due respect, isn't this old news to most of

us?" A Vice Admiral questioned.

"It was old news until several hours ago when I received reports that the rift was more or less stable and that we were receiving UNSC distress signals.

The audience perked up at this piece of information.

"You say the signals were broadcasted through the rift?" the Rear Admiral interrupted again.

"Shut up Paulson. She just answered that." another Rear Admiral said gruffly.

"Where you able to identify them?" asked President Charet.

"We were and furthermore we have cause to believe that one of the missing vessels is colony ship CFV-88, the Spirit of Fire."

The room suddenly became alive with surprised and startled conversation.

"Can you confirm that?" asked Fleet Admiral Hood.

"We can indeed confirm the identity of the ship." said the head of ONI. "We've upgraded communications across all ships several times after first contact on Harvest. Data packets retrieved indicate this is the Spirit of Fire. She was the only ship reported to be using the communications suite native to her in the entire navy. We were unable to determine the newer distress call. All contact from both ceased five minutes after."

"Do we know why?" asked someone in the back.

"No. We at this time do not know why. The signals suddenly cut off. We have reason to suspect that signals may have been jammed or distorted to the point of being unrecognized.

"So what's the plan?" Dr. Charet asked confused.

"There is none. There's no precedent to this situation." Hood said quietly.

"So what do we do?"

"Well we have several options. We can ignore it, we can block it off, or we go through it." Another Fleet Admiral spoke up.

"So do we mount a rescue operation, are we going through? Do we even know if there is anything on the other side?" asked the President as she reviewed the information laid out on the screen.

"I think the better question to ask is \_can \_we go through." an Admiral spoke from the back corner.

"Do we wish to involve the Sangheili?" Dr. Charet asked.

Admiral Osman made to say no but was cut off by Lord Hood.

"Yes. I'm sure the Arbiter will want to be briefed on this. It may

affect him just as much as us." Lord Hood said.

Someone in the back corner made a joke about sacrificing Elites by sending them through but was hushed by the others.

"Has any probe been dispatched through this distortion?" asked a woman sitting in the front right.

"Yes, a dozen or so probes were sent through to determine whether any vessel could survive the crossing. They all did." replied Admiral Osman.

"Any further transmissions?" asked President Charet.

"No." said the head of the Office of Naval Intelligence. "There's one other thing I must mention however. We suddenly lost contact with all the probes two minutes into sending it through. Before we lost signal we got an image of what might be a habitable planet right before something with immense energy destroyed the probes, most likely the portal giving off a fluctuation. Admiral Osman admitted.

The room got quiet again.

"But the probes weren't shielded...right?"

"No. Any shielded vessel would most likely survive though."

"So what are the chances it was the portal's work?" asked a third Admiral.

"Given what we know right now, very probable." Osman replied.

"Is it worth the risk?" asked another.

"It's the Spirit of Fire. Do we need more reason than that?" said an elderly female in the back.

Arguments sprung up suddenly until Lord Hood called for order.

"Do we tell the units still out there?" asked President Charet?

"I think innocence is best right now. Better to not tell and let someone inadvertently slip. It's too important to let slip outside these walls. Understood?" asked the head of ONI.

When she was met with silence Lord Hood spoke up.

"If there are no objections?"

None met him.

"Right then, let's plan."

\*\*END OF TRANSCRIPT\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 1:<p>

\*\*UNSC Central Time: November 21, 2558\*\*

**\*\*UNSC DAUNTLESS BRIDGE AND OBSERVATION DECK: Epsilon Eridani System, Reach, 10:00 hours\*\***

The observation deck of the UNSC Dauntless was the only place on the ship that was buzzing with activity as it orbited the planet of Reach which was still undergoing the long and lengthy process of being re-terraformed. A lone figure stood in front of the glass viewport waiting and watching the stars and galaxy pass while the figure twirled a combat knife in his fingers completing a series of complex rotations and then balancing it on the tip of his finger.

The ship passed the wreckage of a corvette that had participated in the battle from yesterday strewn metal and oxygen in a long ghostly trail that stretched more than double the ship's original length. Several Marathon class Cruisers then drifted past the window after the Corvette. All had been gutted by the energy projector attached to the CAS Class Assault Carrier that came into view after the Cruisers.

It had been a dozen or so hours since the battle ended and they still had yet to receive reinforcements to secure the area. Every second without additional reinforcements would cost them dearly if the Sons of Dosiac were to attack again. The sect was already known and shunned by the Jiralhanae for their extreme zealotry and bloodlust that was extreme, even for their notoriously brute standards. The battle had been shorter than some of the others he had participated in before but it was one he would gladly never repeat.

A member of the bridge crew nervously approached behind him. He paled when he saw the combat knife twirling. If the rumors were true, the twirling knife was usually circled by a ring of enemy soldiers, dead enemy soldiers. That was the one thing about their "temporary" captain, he was encompassed by rumors. Coupled with the fact that he at least stood at least six and half feet tall made him an intimidating figure.

"Uhâ€¦um, Captain?" he nervously asked.

"I prefer Lieutenant if you will." said the figure. The technician was somewhat startled. His voice, while possessing a hint of coldness and bitterness was surprisingly kind.

"Lieutenant?" he asked again.

He turned around his face shrouded by the darkness of the outside space.

"Oh, come on now can any of you take a joke?" he asked somewhat humorously. He laughed good-naturedly twice. "Captain's fine for now. Until they kick me out and say that I can't run a ship anymore."

The crew member nodded. "Captain, we're picking up more spikes from the slipspace anomaly." he said regaining his composure now seeing that their Captain might not be bad as the rumors said he was.

"Very well then, show me."

The technician turned and began walking to the bridge.

"Oh and Avery?" said the figure.

Avery paused and turned around. It was a little unsettling that he knew his name.

"The name's William."

Avery turned again and walked toward the bridge. He turned and walked down a flight of stairs which opened up to the Bridge. As the figure stepped out into the illuminated stairwell he revealed himself to be clad in navy blue armor with ice blue accents. He clutched a MJOLNIR Mk. V Air Assault helmet to his side, also navy blue with a frost black colored visor. His torso was fashioned in the Assault/Commando variant. With FJ/Para knee guard and Hazop shoulder plates, and a tactical soft case on his left thigh. A tacpad on his left arm completed the armor set.

William sighed. How little they all knew. He knew the rumors that circulated around him and the rest of his Spartan compatriots. He had never had a chance to really interact with his predecessors, the Spartan II's, or his generations successors, the Spartan IV's.

As a Spartan III he lived a life that the general public didn't really know about. While it was common record that there was a Spartan IV program, everyone seemed to gloss over the fact that there was a Spartan III program and automatically lump him in with the II's. With any major victory he was involved in, the credit was always given to the II's, the poster children of the program.

He wasn't bitter, they deserved every bit of credit they got and if it further solidified public morale and opinion, so be it. He would continue to work in armor similar to his predecessors and work to bring down the enemies that Humanity faced, both internally and externally. He had to admit he would be intimidating in armor or not. The common soldier or sailor naturally would be somewhat scared of him.

He entered the bridge. The crew on deck saluted and stepped to the side.

"Report?" he asked as he came to the holoprojector. A map of the Epsilon Eridani system was displayed tracking their location and a rift in slipspace.

"Spikes in radiation every minute right now before they settle down. They're all clustered in the immediate area around the distortion in Reach's pole about 100,000 kilometers away."

He paused for a second. His arms crossed over as he thought.

"Sarah, you there?" He finally said.

A flash next to the holo-tank revealed Sarah, the ship's smart AI. AI Elsa with her duties. Sarah was a woman with a fair complexion and dark hair matched by equally as dark eyes.

"Yes?" She said pleasantly.

"Contact HighCom if you will, tell them it's spiking again."

"Yes Lieutenant." She said ignoring his temporary rank. "The fleet will be here soon."

She disappeared in another flash.

"Helm, bring us into high orbit around Reach!" he ordered.

The ship hummed and shifted as the Dauntless adjusted its course.

The UNSC Dauntless was the brainchild of Admiral Pyotr Tchikova in the aftermath of the Great War as humanity began to rebuild its infrastructure and much depleted fleet. The Dauntless was to be the lead ship of the new Dauntless class of "Battlecarriers". Theoretically, the Battlecarrier would have filled in a gap between the Infinity class of warships and the new Vindication class of Light Battleships allow but cost overruns and a lack of major support prevented other ships like it to be constructed. The Brass were focused more on the "quantity" of ships built more than "quality." Construction was begun in March of 2557 a month after the Infinity was unveiled and hadn't been finished until later that year.

At over four kilometers long and equipped with four MAC cannons and numerous Archer, Rapier, and Howler Missile Pods, the ship was designed for orbital supremacy and strategic command and control. Recently an EMP cannon had also been added to its arsenal (the main reason why costs for the ships ran over budget) To protect it further it packed a hefty amount of AAA muscle along the rear that included 600 M965 Fortress 70mm guns, an M97 GMWS network and a M85 AA gun network. Additionally, another recent refit had added a dozen "Onager" class Mass Drivers that were mounted dorsally and along the sides to protect the ship from threats that got too close to it.

Its engines and slipspace drive were near identical to the UNSC Infinity which significantly improved its effective range. It carried a full Brigade of Marines of about 8000 strong and a full wing of Air Force pilots. Twelve platoons of ODST's were stationed on board with another contingent of soldiers apart of the Army (about 5000). It also carried additional complements of former Covenant Separatist troops and a myriad of vehicles that could be readied for usage in any environment.

Finally, Admiral Tchikova's final personal touch had been to overhaul the ship (again) so that she could carry additional ships internally like the Infinity. The main hangar had been overhauled and expanded to carry two Paris class Heavy Frigates, the Infamous Frigates Saratoga and Yorktown.

To top it all off, the Dauntless had the potential to fully house 50 Spartans, their armor, and all the other material needed to maintain them on its own S-Deck. Current UNSC policy suggested that Infinity was the de-facto home of the Spartan branch so unfortunately there wasn't any Spartans that called it home with the exception of William. While not as impressive as the Infinity, its larger more advanced cousin, it still was very capable of sending its own message with its own...unique way.

For all its strength, at the moment, most of its armed complement were scattered among the rest of the rag-tag fleet moored at a small naval refit station that had recently been reconstructed in orbit of



Reach.

A beep from the com station got his attention. Striding over he saw it was from Fleet Admiral Hood. He keyed open the channel and the face of Lord Terrence filled the screen.

"Greetings Spartan." He said in his clipped British accent. "The Admiral still napping?"

"Greetings to you as well Admiral. The Admiral is indisposed right now." William replied.

Admiral Pyotr Tchikova, who was currently recuperating in an orbital surgical ward at the nearby refit station had given command of the Dauntless to the William raising some eyebrows in the process. It had made headlines minutes ago when the UNSC released a general statement about what happened yesterday to the press. So far they had both drawn the criticism of many prominent individuals. Such a thing wasn't even heard of. Spartans were made for following orders with lethality, not to be giving them to a tactically important vessel. ONI, for whatever shadowy reason had sanctioned the move.

So, however out of place he was for the moment, he stayed. He would have rather had some Naval Officer that outranked him.

"Sarah just informed us that you're picking up more spike in activity?"

"That is correct sir." He said.

"Thank you for keeping us posted. Just as a heads up, I've asked the Swords of Sangheilios for assistance on studying the anomalies. They are just as intrigued and as so they will be sending along a fleet of their own to help secure the site and study it. We're thinking of mounting a mission to see if we can recover the source of the distress signal. As of right now this is not just a UNSC mission but an ALLSPEC mission. The Arbiter will relinquish control when he arrives to Admiral Del Rio who is slated to take over in a few hours."

"Sir, can I ask why I'm here?" he asked somewhat confused. "Why am I leading this ship? I'm a soldier of the ground, not a Captain."

"Son, let's face it. The Brute's made it their priority to eliminate all leadership and they \*\*\*\* near did a flawless job. Those who survived are currently hospitalized so you'll have to do for now. Like I've said before, you're here only to fill in until Del Rio arrives. You've at least had training from Admiral Tchikova in operating a ship. I think you can manage that for now Spartan. I wouldn't complain if someone in ONI is sanctioning it. You have a well-trained crew at your disposal and a Smart AI. I think you will be fine."

"Anything else sir?" he said still unhappy with his current lot in life.

"The Infinity and Fourth Fleet are en-route to you now."

"Sir permission to speak freely?"

"Granted."

"We're currently strategically in a bad position yes, but isn't this overkill sir?"

"She's the only ship with an attachment of Spartan IV's onboard who I'm told need a little more action right now. There are Brutes still hiding out in the nearby systems. This is to be her first full, extensive trial run of some new systems; Infinity doesn't need to return to Requiem right now because of its death in the nearby star. I've briefed Commander Palmer and Captain Lasky about the situation and both are intrigued by this new development. You're to split the fleet in half upon arrival if Del Rio does not show up. Allied Command won't be with you until you can establish contact on the other side if you chose to venture through."

"Acknowledged sir." William said.

"Then I'll see you on the other side, give the Admiral my greetings if he arrives. Hood out."

The screen closed and William went back to the holo projector table.

\_"They must be hiding something. ALLCOMM doesn't get involved unless it's that important."\_

He mused about how interesting it was to see the changes that came out of the end of the Great War. In a historic move in 2555, the Governments of every species in the galaxy came together to create a mutual alliance they dubbed the Allied Species, a sort of galaxy wide United Nations in the process. An increase in technological advancement and trading between the two grew rapidly and peace for the moment was established.

Humanity and the various species of the Covenant Separatist still had much to go as far as friendship but in comparison with two decades earlier, the situation had improved vastly. Now only in important matters did the Allied Command (ALLCOMM) get involved.

"Orbit around planet achieved." the voice of Sarah said from behind him.

"Go ahead and establish contact with the fleet when they arrive." He said still thinking.

"Infinity task group arriving in t-minus thirty minutes." She said.

William looked out the viewports in front on him and waited for the fleet to arrive. While he waited he absentmindedly fiddled around with the tacpad. He accidentally triggered the roster function and suddenly a projection of 20 names, faces, and numbers was brought up. Friends, Teammates, Family. They were all gone with the exception of one of them and he didn't know where she was assigned to.

All that he could do was pray that six of those names that were marked MIA were actually MIA and not the alternative. That was why he originally agreed to be a part of APS a month after its realization.

It had been two months and the farthest he had ever gone was back to Harvest to deploy another recolonizing team.

He stared at Reach and felt many memories bubble up. So many of Special Warfare Team Castle had fallen trying to save lives on this planet. Now the majority lay in a grave site at Earth. The battle there had been years ago but it was still painful to think about it. Now the only inhabitants were a couple of corporations chipping away the glass, trying to breathe life into the dead planet.

As the ship was orbited, a large purple disc of energy floated off in the distance and pulsed slowly. He stared at the reason why he was here and then went back to staring at the planet. Once upon a time he had a team, a goal, a task, and a place within the universe. Now the team was gone and his goals, unreachable, his tasks mundane, his place in the universe uncertain.

"Task group arrives in ten seconds!" one of the techs said.

A bright flash of brilliant white, blue, and purple produced an enormous ship surrounded by several smaller ones. He quickly identified them as 14 Autumn class cruisers. He also spotted three Epoch class carriers among the group, a Punic class Supercarrier and numerous Stalwart Frigates and Destroyers. The rest of the bridge looked up from what they were doing and almost silently moved over to the viewport to catch a glimpse. They all stared in amazement at the size of the Infinity compared to the rest of the flotilla.

"No wonder they call it the jewel of the Home Fleet." remarked Sarah with interest.

The Infinity was being escorted by additional ten of the new Autumn class cruisers named after the famous Pillar of Autumn.

Another flash of white and purple brought the Covenant fleet into view.

William whistled as he saw a CSO class Supercarrier flanked by three of the much smaller Assault Carriers. Followed by six heavy cruisers, four RPV class destroyers and six SDV class Corvette's. The two fleets completely filled the space above the atmosphere of Reach.

"Total ship count stands at 96 sirs." said Sarah. The Arbiter and Infinity are both hailing us."

"Establish communication with both." William said distractedly as he pondered his next move.

The two colored holographic images of a middle aged captain with a young but somber looking face and a Sangheili adorned in gold armor filled the command table. He looked up and seeing communication had been established bowed slightly.

\_"Greetings Demon, Captain Lasky, I am Fleetmaster Rtaakaan of the Supercarrier Rising Flame at your service." He said in the deep guttural voice of the Sangheili.\_

"And to you as well Shipmaster. Greetings Captain Lasky." He said addressing the younger Captain.

\_ "I'm glad to have had this chance to meet\_." Captain Lasky replied.  
\_"Where is the Arbiter?"

\_ "He was to join us but recent events on Sangheilios have changed his plans. He is needed at the battlefield so he sent me in his place."\_

"Your journey was safe then?" William asked.

\_ "Yes, thank you, we are grateful that the UEG has graciously allowed us use of their refueling ports and shipyards. Half of what I have has just been repaired. Jul' Mndama started terrorizing the shipping lanes and raiding. We've had to resort to convoys but as you can tell, it hasn't had much success."\_

"And you Lasky?"

\_ "Infinity and fleet are a-ok, though we've had the same problem with Jul."\_

\_ "Demon, forgive me, but I must say, I expected an Officer in uniform to greet us, does your military now put you in positions of power?" \_the Fleetmaster asked.

"We were recently attacked by Brute Pirates. They boarded most of the ships in our fleet and killed most of our leadership before we had time to react and formulate a plan. Most of the survivors are in recovery at the refit station. I was put in charge by an Admiral for the moment. Is there a problem?"

\_ "No Demon. I was only asking."\_

"Glad to hear it. Now, first things first." said William bringing up a map of the system.

"The distortions are coming about one hundred thousand clicks near the northern pole of Reach. Probes have been dispatched and have revealed that these disruptions are really portals. Incredible fine, rifts in slipspace that possess a gravity of their own and lead somewhere. Explorations of probes have turned up somewhere else entirely. Radio messages from all ceased at 1:30 hours last night. The task I was originally given is to find out what went wrong and why they disappeared. We were startled yesterday when two UNSC distress signals came through. Command has yet to tell if they've identified them or not. The plan of action is currently not set in stone with most of the leadership gone but I'm sure now that we are here we can set up a research station and study this anomaly in more detail."

\_ "So in other words we are deviating slightly from our course?" asked the Fleetmaster inquisitively.\_

"Yes. But we are to return to normal duties upon learning what happened.

\_ "Then form up on the carrier and accompany to the disruptions. We will dispatch science craft immediately" said the Fleetmaster.\_

"All ships," the Fleetmaster said over the com link with the other vessels, "Set heading to 020 by 255 and form up on the Rising Flame. Adjust Reactor output to 65%. And accompany us to the portal." He ordered.

The ship leaped forward with the rest of the fleet. The Dauntless and Infinity formed up on either side of the Supercarrier. The rest of the fleet formed up in a diamond formation. Firepower and size of the various ships was taken into account, ships maneuvered and the fleet moved forward.

The fleet passed the refit station on the right. A squad of Broadsword fighters flew past the window and started docking at the station. William strode over to another viewport and stared at the rift that they were approaching.

"We've got something!" said one of the Tech's said looking at his identical console. "Rift's gravity field is fluctuating."

"How badly?"

The ship suddenly jerked as they crossed over an invisible line.

"That badly?!" the man asked fearfully.

"Take reactor speed to 75% at full reverse and increase shields to 50% forward!" William barked.

From the comm station there was a sudden burst of messages as everyone gave orders to get out of the sudden gravitational field.

"All ships bring up reactors to 150% output and apply 200% reverse! All shields deploy bow wards!" said the Fleetmaster panicking slightly.

William was knocked off his feet as the ship gave another jolt and roared even louder as it tried to stop. Lights surged and a couple cables overhead broke loose.

"Disruption is stabilizing!" Navigation called out.

The ship stopped bucking and Will gave the order to get the ship far away from the rift.

"Attention all ships! Power down reactor levels to 29% to cool off and maintain formation." said the Fleetmaster after another moment. "That was too close."

The hum of the Dauntless dropped to almost a whisper.

The Command Table suddenly lit up with the holograms of the Shipmaster and Captain.

"Thanks for the heads up." Lasky said. "Now that we know where the distortion's potential field of gravity is we need to split the Fleet and establish a perimeter for the science teams-"

"Spartan." a cold voice from behind Will said.

William turned to see a shorter man with graying hair and a stern face. Admiral Del Rio eyed him back with contempt. Two Spartan IV bodyguards in Gray stood emotionless behind him.

"Lieutenant, what are you doing up here at the bridge of MY fleet?" he said smugly with the trace of a smile. "I thought you were supposed to be in your quarters." The smile and sinister joy emerged slightly from behind a cold mask of disgust.

"Admiral, with all due respect you said you would be here in another hour or so. You sent me a memo to my Tacpad earli-

"That's funny Lieutenant, but I can't seem to recall any memo." He said too innocently.

William stared at him for a second.

"Sarah," William said turning to the AI's pedestal.

"Look up all memos received between yesterday and today."

"Doing so." Sarah said. Her hologram flickered as she scoured the tacpad.

Admiral Del Rio stared at her with a satisfied smile.

Sarah looked up from her thought.

"Thatâ€¦ that's not possible." She slowly and worriedly said. Confusion became etched on her holographic features. "I saw the message myselfâ€¦ it's not there!"

Del Rio flashed a triumphant smile.

"Now then Lieutenant, I'll be nice to you. You get off this bridge in the next three seconds or you will be put in the brig for an entire week. I'm in command here now.

"Lord Hood sends his greetings Admiral. If you need me, I'll be figuring out how to get off this ship."

"WHAT did you say to me SPARTAN?!" his bodyguards tensed. The bridge turned towards the shouting. Officers and Techs nearest the pair backed slowly unsure what to do.

"Let me make one thing clear SPARTAN!" he spat. "I'M in command on this ship now. And you will refer to me as \_sir\_! Understood? You are a Spartan who is to follow orders TO THE LETTER. Now do so and get off this bridge." He said coldly.

Nobody moved.

William finally saluted and started walking.

"Sarah I want a best estimate on how to split the fleet! Navigation! Keep us out from being sucked in until we're ready to proceed. We're proceeding earlier than planned" said Del Rio still livid as William continued down the hallway.

The various crew and personal on the ship parted as he walked. He strode by a pack of grunts staring in a mixture of awe and terror at the figure.

That was one thing William had enjoyed when being on this ship. The Dauntless had been specifically requested by Admiral Tchkova to be able to include living quarters and accommodations of the various races of the Allied Species. He had long since respected the species of the late Covenant Empire for their unique talents as well as their devotion to a cause, a fact that hadn't pleased everyone he had met; Admiral Del Rio being one of the top five on that list.

Will in his frustration found himself subconsciously heading to the armory to access the firing range for practice.

The door opened and he was greeted with nobody inside. Perfect. Nobody needed to see this Spartan vent a little anger.

Will decided his helmet was a little too stuffy and took it off. He quickly found a DMR hanging on the wall. He picked it up grabbed a few magazines from a nearby dispenser and checked the action before moving over to a corner and scanning the room.

He stepped up to the line and waited.

"\_\_Welcome back Spartan William. Would you like to run last time's simulation?" \_Elsa chirped at him from above.

"No thank you. Small targets please." He answered.

Several fist sized targets popped up and began move in random directions.

He picked the nearest one and fired drilling the target in the center of the bullseye. A second one met a similar fate, then a third, then a fourth.

"You and I both know just shooting targets is not a good way to relieve stress." A voice from behind said.

"Elsa, suspend practice." Will said putting the gun down and turning around to see his friend and blood brother Ripa 'Talam striding towards him. He stood a foot and half taller than William, considered slightly larger than average by Sangheili standards and wore SpecOps armor. His claret red armor with crimson accents had just been cleaned from a slight smell of chemicals.

William remembered with grim satisfaction the incidents on Mamore, a colony filled with chaos and disorder at its best that had brought these two warriors together. They had first met when a local terrorist group had blown up the exit to a tunnel that ran underneath the Capital and blocked off the road. They had captured around 15 dozen civilians, a couple Sangheili ambassadors that had been taken hostage days before, and a few police officers who had tried to help, and strapped them with bombs. Then they had stuffed them inside the tunnel and told if anybody were to rescue them they would blow up the tunnel killing all.

They had again met by chance when they were picked to help rescue the hostages. They served as distractions and drew attention away from

the hostages while others freed them. The two fought their way out, Ripa getting wounded in the process. They eventually had to leap off a bridge to avoid being killed. Ripa had broken several bones doing this but William had carried for ten excruciating miles for help and then gone back to help.

The mission had been a success after William used Sarah to disrupt the link between explosives and detonator but it created a friendship nobody could deny. Ripa and William were so close afterwards that he had received an honor that only few individuals experienced. He had been deemed an honorary member of the 'Talam clan and had had their crest, a pale blue energy sword crossing with a crimson one, branded on his armor at a special dinner that he had been the guest of honor for. Ripa also had one of these symbols branded on his right shoulder plate at the same dinner.

"You fought well yesterday Demon."

"As did you."

"Those traitorous vermin will pay for all the blood they spilled, but no more on that subject. It is better to dwell on the finer points of existence such as literature."

Ripa moved past him and sat in a chair in the corner and pulled open a holopad.

"Shall I tell you about the latest literature of your kind that I have read?" he asked.

"Go for it." Will said unloading the DMR and cleaning up the brass he had thrown on the floor.

Will privately wondered whether this was the best place to be reading literature but dropped the thought. Ripa looked up and watched as William strode over to him.

"I recently finished 'Huckleberry Finn' by your Mark Twain."

"I thought you were reading Sun Tzu."

"I devote other time to studying military tactics. He has honorable ideas but some ideas I think are slightly beyond reason."

"Such as?" Will raised an eyebrow.

Ripa waved it away. "Another time, now's not the moment to be debating the merits of Sun Tzu."

"So what did you think of Huck Finn?"

He chuckled. "Twain's tongue could certainly do battle with some of the elders at 'Talam Keep. Hisâ€|what is the term?"

"Satire?" Will provided.

"Yes. Saatire." Ripa said mispronouncing it. "It's ingenious with how he applies it to so many topics. If this book were to be translated for all the Covenant to read, it would be decried as heresy. No prophet would suffer such words on organized religion and slavery to



be made."

"Then I'm sure Twain would have been pleased."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Hmmpf." Ripa huffed. "What's wrong with you

"I am totally fine." Will lied.

"And my mother was an Unngoy." Ripa snorted. \_"What troubles you brother?"\_ he asked this time in Sangheili.

Will finished checking the weapon and hung it back on the wall.

\_""Some people are justâ€|rude. That is all."\_ Will replied in equally perfect Sangheili.

"Admiral Del Rio?"

Will nodded before turning to face him.

\_""My apologies. He seems like the type of creature nobody wants to interact with."\_

William said nothing but leaned against the wall.

\_""Between you and I, I've heard rumors that he had falling out with your supreme Demon or something to that effect. He didn't want to be shown up and the supreme Demon proved himself right and your Admiral wrong. Any humiliation might be expressed as hatred towards you."\_

"That's what I thought." Will said returning to his native tongue.

The holopad suddenly flickered.

"Again?"

"Oh please don't tell me the portal's acting up." Will grumbled.

The lights in the room suddenly went out entirely plunging the firing range into complete darkness. William found his shields suddenly depleted and slowly recharging. Several screams and roars issued from the mouths of various frightened troops outside as the sudden darkness took them off guard.

"Gravity field from the rift." Will said. "If Del Rio is smart then we should be out of this in a moment."

The ship bucked wildly without warning eliciting more shouts from the people outside. A needle of fear began to prick his consciousness. He always knew that going through the portal might be an option but so soon?

"You were saying?"

"Please don't become like Mark Twain. Will grumbled

Pale red emergency lighting illuminated from a single light above barely lit up the room. Another jolt caused William to stagger slightly. He quickly put his helmet on his head and tried to get his bearings again.

"Sarah what's going on?" he asked as he rubbed his neck where Ripa had just accidentally smacked him.

Instead of an answer he got instant chatter that filled the helmet as radio started picking up dialogue from other soldiers and sailors in the fleet. He picked out one message from the rest.

"All hands, be advised the rift is destabilizing, recommend that we abort mission for the timeâ€" "\_

A massive bang accompanied by a horrendous jolt lifted the two of them off their feet and brought them down again as the ship lurched and jolted. William saw Ripa growl as he tried unsuccessfully to get up. The emergency lighting failed all of a sudden and the ship rocked back and forth with gravity becoming slightly less than normal

"Attention\_ all hands!"\_ William heard Admiral Del Rio call over the emergency PA system.

"We have suffered complete and utter failure of navigation and propulsion, the fleet is reporting massive power failures and chaos! All hands brace for emergency protocol!"\_

The emergency lights flickered back to life and Will moved to the exit. The door opened and through one of the reinforced windows William saw that they had transferred into the realm of Slipspace.

"We're going to die!"

William realized he had wandered right into the middle of a platoon of Marines that was struggling to hang on to something.

"We need to move to cover NOW!" roared Ripa at the terrified group.

"Not the easiest of tasks!" one of them angrily retorted.

They felt the hum of the ship increase as the Dauntless struggled to maintain power to its critical systems. A small viewport ran alongside the firing range. The blue light from slipspace illuminated it and the corridor. William could now hear screams and shouts from other parts of the ship reverberating around the hallways. The ship hurdled left and right faster and faster with the loud roar becoming ever more present and the screams of terror even more petrifying until with an enormous bang the ship emerged out of slipspace. William saw down the hallway a few grunts and sailors poke their heads out of rooms and close

The ship was dead silent. Sparks flew from cables overhead that been

torn open and William felt the ship spinning slightly. He only needed to look out the window to confirm that they were indeed spinning slightly. As the ship rotated slowly a blue sphere came into view, clearly a planet, with what looked like a surface completely covered in ice and snow with massive storms brewing on the surface, one that he did not recognize at all.

"What's the phrase your author Frank L. Baum said?" Ripa asked.  
"We're not in Ohio anymore?"

"I don't think we're in Kansas anymore." William corrected.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Review please!<em>

\_So what did you all think? \_

\_This chapter was edited to correct some longstanding grammar mistakes, reflect a more accurate depiction of the Dauntless class of vessels, and address some discrepancies with William captaining a ship. Dialogue with Del Rio changed to reflect more civil tone.\_

\*\*(Chapter Overhauled 1/26/2015)\*\*

## 2. Chapter 2

\_Hello! theotherpianist here! I turned this chapter out today! Wow, already I have over a hundred hits! Thanks a lot. Continue to read and review!\_

\_As always Halo and Star Wars are not mine and belong to their respectful owners. Enjoy.\_

Chapter Two:

\*\*Error: Cannot determine System, guidance system malfunction:  
Unknown Planet; uncharted regions\*\*

\*\*Error: Critical calendar malfunction/ reboot sys. / November  
21\*\*\*\*st\*\*\*\* 2559: 23:46 hours\*\*

\*\*UNSC Dauntless, Attached to 3\*\*\*\*rd\*\*\*\* Fleet:\*\*

The crippled ship moaned softly as the engineers, technicians, and a couple of the Huragok tried to fix the power and turn it on to restore the ship to normal. William quickly walked through the corridors with Ripa trying to locate Admiral Del Rio and the officers for an emergency conference with the other Captains and Fleetmaster. Will had been ordered onboard the Salvation to listen in and Ripa was trying to secure a supply of plasma cores to be loaded onto the Dauntless for extra power.

Communications had been restored but the only other ship that had travelled with them was the CAS Carrier Salvation which the Fleetmaster was currently commanding. When William and Ripa had rounded up enough personnel they boarded a Pelican and boarded the Carrier after being called up to conference with the heads of the two

ships. Del Rio had rudely decided to stay on board and William had decided to leave without him. It was worth too much trouble to try and get him to join.

The bridge of the Salvation as he entered was dimly light but the holodeck that surrounded the center of it provided decent illumination. By this time power on all ships had been established so most the crew could remain onboard their respective ship and essential personnel could listen in on the conference.

"Are all present and accounted for?" asked Fleetmaster Rtaakaan a little impatiently.

A quick role count was taken. Satisfied everyone important except Del Rio was there the Fleetmaster began.

"At least the more sensible part of our leadership is here. Does anybody know where we are?"

"No Fleetmaster, we have no astronomical data of this surrounding area. We are in orbit around an unknown planet and judging by all the star positions we are not in the Solian Galaxy." Said a Field Marshal gesturing to a three dimensional view of the Star System they were in right now.

An officer came over and warbled something next to the Fleetmaster's ear.

The Fleetmaster turned and started conversing with him rapidly in Sangheili.

"Whatâ€¦disturbâ€¦..areâ€¦checkâ€¦.again!" was all William's translation software picked up.

William saw Ripa pale slightly as he listened. The shipmaster of the cruiser walked in and stopped as he saw the two conversing.

"Sirs!" said Sarah as she materialized on the holoprojector.  
"Contacts detected moving at faster than light speeds!"

"What? Where?" snarled the Fleetmaster.

"5000 kilos off our port near the planet's atmosphere!" said Sarah after a moment.

"Put up the observation window." ordered the Fleetmaster after a moment.

Blast shields surrounding the bridge dematerialized and dropped revealing the transparent energy windows. The group held its breath in anticipation.

Suddenly 80 "ships" seemingly popped into view at the speed of light. One look at them was enough to confirm it was definitely manned, crewed, and military in origin.

This was met by a hail of curses from Humans and Sangheili alike the Shipmaster even went as far as igniting his energy sword.

"Send communications back to the Arbiter! Harvest Protocol is now in

effect! "

"Doing so! Alerting the Dauntless also! Responses asking what to do!" said a Sangheili officer in his native language.

"Fleetmaster, we're receiving transmission from the largest of the vessels! Audio only!"

Indeed the largest was longer than all of the fleet with the exception of the Dauntless and Rising Flame. It was cylindrical in shape and was some 3000 meters in length. For all intents and purposes it looked like a massive bullet. A spire towards the rear of it jutted out backwards. A bulge on top also revealed a Command Deck. Several "cannons" were visible alongside its port and starboard.

"Play it!" the Fleetmaster said after a moment.

"Sirs, it seems to be in English." said Sarah after a second, "Unknown contacts moving into firing ranges."

"Play the message." said the Fleetmaster.

"Attention Republic scum, you are moving into newly claimed CIS territory. You are advised to leave the system or be shot this is your one chance; in fact, this is your only chance. Do not waste it!" said a voice that wasn't quite human but sounded humanoid."

"Sirs, they're charging weapons!" Sarah shouted frantically.

"I want all shields and weapon systems ready now!" the Fleetmaster said as the crew and officers suddenly sprang into action. He strode over to the holographic display and punched and pushed buttons turning the holographic display into a battle map.

"Send off a counter message! Try to diffuse the situation now! And someone get the Dauntless in sync with us. I need all fighters in space now and in last stand positions."

"They're not responding!" an Elite roared from his station.

"They're launching fighters!" screamed a grunt.

"Acknowledged, DO NOT FIRE until fired upon!" he said.

William turned around and saw the officers other key members of the Dauntless standing in the corner hesitant.

"Sirs, you need to head back to your respective ships! We can't risk too many personnel on board on one ship!" he said.

"Right let's move it!" yelled one of the Officers and ran. The rest turned and followed suit.

"We are hopelessly outnumbered." he grimaced. Sangheili did not like to admit an enemy actually had the chance of beating them and from his face Will saw the fear behind his eyes. "I want reactor outputs at 100% and prepare for..."

"Fleetmaster! They're firing!" roared the Principle Weapons

Officer.

"Targets firing laser based weaponry!" shouted Sarah. "Impact i..."

An enormous explosion rocked the Carrier and the lighting flickered as the red lances of energy connected with the ships energy shields hard enough to make the crew stumble.

"I do believe our engines are gone!" Ripa said running back into the bridge. He stopped. "Who are they?" he said pointing to the enemy fleet.

The Shipmaster swore in Sangheili. "Where did that fire come from?"

"Did they just shoot us?" Ripa asked.

"More contacts emerging from above and behind us!" a Minor reported fire coming from all sides.

William swung around to see more of the alien warships suddenly blink into existence which immediately deposited all their fighters into space.

"VIP's off board!" yelled a Minor from the Comm. Station.

"Hostile contact established! Return fire!" The Fleetmaster ordered after a moment. "Tell Dauntless to charge MAC's and fire at the nearest vessel. Fire plasma torpedoes at the nearest vessel to give the Dauntless a window and then burn the Heretics with our energy projectors. William back to the Dauntless with Ripa now.

"Doing so!" said the Communications Officer. The PWO did the same and ordered the strikes.

The Carrier trembled despite its inertial dampeners as heated plasma erupted from turrets and splashed across the nearest enemy vessel. The first torpedo spread over the hull and its shields died. The second torpedo cut through the metal and cut through to its engines creating a small star as its reactors went critical.

"Again!" the Fleetmaster roared and another wave of plasma erupted claiming the lives of another three vessels.

The Dauntless, William was relieved to see, jumped to the opportunity speeding right pass the wreckage of the warship and firing its main guns. Twin 1000 ton ferric tungsten covered rounds punched through a warship that had two curved arms surrounding a giant sphere and left the arms decompressing rapidly as the MAC rounds blew through it with ease. He was put to ease as he saw the Dauntless start an orbital "run" path between the moon of the planet and the planet itself. Del Rio at least, wouldn't blow up the ship up.

"The Dauntless is away!" yelled the Helm Officer.

Cheers erupted as they watched it distance itself and then right itself around and sending a torrent of missiles against the enemy vessels turning many into massive piles of scrap. William turned with Ripa and started running out.

Suddenly a massive cloud of what looked like fighters bore down on the Carrier with relentless force as the ships turned to focus on the Carrier.

He turned the comlink in his helmet to focus on the Bridge's conversation.

\_"Sir, enemy salvos approaching fast!" \_shouted a Grunt.

\_"Brace yourself!"\_ cried the Fleetmaster as more lasers rushed towards the Carrier.

With a loud bang that set off many more alarms the ship stumbled against the numerous bolts of energy.

\_"Shields at 30% and holding!"\_ shouted a grunt.

Then the reports trickled in.

\_"Communications are down!"\_

\_"I've lost Plasma Turrets 3-7!"\_

\_ "We've lost forward attitude control!"\_

\_ "We're venting atmosphere in Hangar 7!"\_

\_ "Damage to rear levels in extreme!"\_

Will ducked with Ripa as a bulkhead came down with a mighty crash blocking their exit off to the Pelican in the hangar ahead of them. They immediately started back tracking. They entered the bridge again to hear the Fleetmaster roar for retreat.

"Get us out of here!" ordered the Fleetmaster in Sangheili as the Carrier valiantly tried to return the insult by firing its energy projector bisecting two of the smaller ships and immediately clearing the sky around it by firing all pulse lasers.

"Shipmaster, we are being surrounded!" a Grunt shouted fearfully.

Ripa roared as he slammed his fist into the purple wall denting it slightly.

"Incoming burst from lead contact!" Said a minor in red armor.

All heads turned to see the largest ship lazily and almost sinisterly turned and fired from two massive cannons on under its prow.

The shipmaster swore, and the Fleetmaster frantically ordered Helm to fire emergency thrusters. William braced himself and shouted for everyone to get out. Time seemed to slow down as he went into what was dubbed Spartan time. The crew seemed to slow down as the Unggoy, Kigyar, and Sangheili turned and ran. William stayed and waited waving everyone through the doors. Finally he shoved Ripa, the Fleetmaster, and the Shipmaster out the door.

He was half way out when he realized Sarah was still inserted into

the main computer. He had moments until impact. He yanked on her crystal and lunged for the door. He drew his pistol as he ran and fired it at the mechanisms holding the door open.

The shot seemed muffled and William saw the bullet leave the pistol. He dove as the shot pierced the panel and the doors swung close. He turned as a tremendous explosion blew him away. The concussion felt like a solid blow. He was vaguely aware of blast doors squealing shut as the bridge was opened to the vacuum of space. The world reverted to real time again and he was knocked off his feet and sent sliding along the purple floors a good five feet.

"All crew evacuate and abandon ship!" the Fleetmaster shouted as he ran through the corridors. William felt the ship start to list and slide from beneath him as he picked himself up.

"It's no good! We're out of control! We can't escape!" another Elite roared over the battle-net.

"Sarah what's going on!" he said as he yanked himself around a bulkhead at twenty miles per hour. He sped past dead crew torn apart by shrapnel or cooked by heat.

"That last one hit our reactors! All systems are down and we are spiraling towards the planet! We'll barely have enough oxygen to survive the trip through atmosphere."

He turned the corner and found himself in the hangar where most of the crew it seemed was located. He quickly spotted the crew of the bridge. Their spiral was rapidly increasing and as William reinserted Sarah into his helmet the ship tilted suddenly ominously and shrieked.

Suddenly a massive bang sent a bulwark flying. It connected with the Fleetmaster whom he had caught up to and the Sangheili crumpled to the deck and did not move.

"All crew members find a secure location and duck and cover! We're going down! He said finally trying to pull air into his lungs. He realized the vacuum seal on his helmet had been broken. The oxygen levels were now thin as the doomed ship lost its oxygen steadily.

"Sarahâ€¦ calculate crash sitesâ€¦ make itâ€¦ so we don'tâ€¦ kill ourselvesâ€¦ on landingâ€¦ adjust thrust accordinglyâ€¦ start a countdown. If you can'tâ€¦ find us a landing siteâ€¦ overload reactorsâ€¦ incase the enemy tries to board." William said as Sarah from inside his helmet watched his vitals flat line."

"We're dead man! We're dead! Screamed a marine from the contingent that was stationed onboard.

"We're all in this together! Everybody hang on!" another Marine said.

"Doing soâ€¦ Lieutenant." She said disconsolately as he stoically awaited whatever fate.

Suddenly Sarah snapped back into focus. She would NOT lose this battle. She faced her challenge, hesitated and then began. Quickly



she diverted what was left from weapons and slid down the massive blast doors of the hangar. She frantically sent out small scans of the topography below. There was a mountain range. Did she dare try? She quickly performed about a million calculations coming to the conclusion that any other place would be too long to try and crash on and the crew would die of asphyxiation by then.

She then diverted the remaining power for thrusters and weapons. She had one chance. In a flash she triggered the engines in a ten second burst. Unfortunately this now put the ship at speeds too great for a crash landing. She inventoried what was left of the weaponry. Plasma torpedoes on port side were intact and the energy projection beam was intact. The plasma turrets were still intact to. She took a vital second to confirm her plan and then started.

She fired the maneuvering thrusters a second to throw her to the top left of a mountain. She aimed the ship for the side. She quickly sent out a tight wave beam scan and discovered the mountains, though ice covered had decent iron content. She then quickly rewrote the plasma turrets firmware to fire a contiguous beam that was charged electromagnetically. When she was yards away from impact she fired the emergency thrusters and fired the cruisers energy projectors at the mountain. The impact from the energy projectors seemed to stop the ship momentarily as she guided the beams and emergency thrusters to direct the ship over the mountain. The polarity of the beam and mountain polar equals.

It seemed almost impossible. Sarah mused; a vessel weighing well over several hundred tons was holding itself up magnetically by a couple of beat up plasma turrets. She realized the power was fading fast so she cut the flow of plasma and the ship dropped; a multi hundred ton rock. It landed with a hard crash that she observed knocked the crew about, on a plateau.

The soldiers collectively started to realize what was happening. Many of them poked their heads out of the various hiding places now present. The group collectively sighed in relief and started cheering.

"Thanks Sarah. Not sure how you pulled it off but that was amazing." William said as he regained his breath and filled his lungs with precious oxygen.

Suddenly a loud, rumbling crack punctuated their celebrations.

"What the heck was that?" complained a Marine.

"Quit your mouth DiNozzo! Don't jinx anything!" said another Marine.

"I have a bad feeling about this." Said Ripa warily.

"What you expect us to fall or something?" The Marine named DiNozzo said jokingly.

The Carrier slid downwards.

The mountain plateau also partially broke off from a combination of heat and pressure creating an avalanche of rock and snow that threatened to smother all.

"DiNozzo!" screamed most of the human crew almost simultaneously.

Ripa and the Shipmaster cursed as they started falling.

"Great, we're falling. You just HAD to open your \*\*\*\* mouth!" roared a Sergeant

"Find some cover!" William roared over the sound of over one thousand soldiers and sailors roaring, and screaming, as the ship plunged down the mountain side like an overzealous skier.

A massive thump punctuated the chaos and the blast doors were ripped off exposing the self-generating shields that kept things out, but not in. The screams, yells, howls, and general pandemonium increased as their speed increased. The ship moaned as it swung left.

William grabbed a thick heavy bar of metal that had come loose from the wall in the initial explosion and held on as tightly as he could. He saw through the shields the sides of the mountain, grim, menacing, and ice-locked. He looked at the other side as the ship suddenly slid right. The ship was caught in between two grooves on the side of the mountain that hoped led to the bottom somewhere.

A massive BANG! punctuated the pandemonium as a massive rock fell through the ceiling of the hangar and started rolling towards a group of soldiers.

"HOLY CRAP!" screamed a marine who was not more than twenty years old. He jumped and lunged out of the way as the boulder rolled toward him. It promptly crushed a row of Banshees hanging from the ceiling.

"\*\*\*\*!" screamed another Marine as the boulder suddenly rolled toward him.

He and several others rolled out of the way as the rock rolled past... and then back.

\_The scene is movie worthy.\_ William thought.

"Oh COME ON!" yelled the Sergeant as the rock rolled toward him.

"SCREW YOU STUPID ROCK!" said the 20 year old Marine angrily as he hit the deck again.

The Carrier groaned menacingly as it swung around the side of the mountain in a high g turn eliciting more curses and shouts. William turned and saw the Marine flying towards the shield bay doors and him. He left his cover and grabbed the Marine as he soared towards instant death and caught him.

"Stay down he ordered as he put him in his spot of cover. He saw out of the corner of his eye the ship was approaching a steep drop off where it suddenly leveled off.

"Look out! Drop-off straight ahead! Hold on to something everybody!"

The ship slid faster and faster down the slope.

"Here we go!" called a Marine in enthusiastically.

"Are you mad?! Roared Ripa right next to him."

"Hey just because he don't like sliding doesn't mean we don't!" he retorted quickly.

"YapYap no like flying!" screeched a grunt right next to him.

"Shut up! We might allâ€|" The Shipmaster never finished as his ship suddenly left the ground as it ended suddenly and dropped off into a sheer cliff.

Several Marines wet themselves.

"Impact in twenty seconds!" Sarah said over the intercom.

The continual yells, roars, and howls, of terrified (and some crazily exhilarated) people and aliens reached a crescendo as the ship reached terminal velocity and gravity became almost nonexistent and the boulder rolled out of the hangar bay.

"15 seconds to landing!"

William braced himself and locked his armor down.

And the world went white.

\_So Will is stuck on a ice planet in the middle of nowhere and the Separatists have been introduced.. Any ideas where that is? I also know that some of you have PM'd me asking for a chapter with Will's back story. That's coming in a future chapter. As always please review. I'm also open to ideas for how to develop this as it progresses.\_\_  
><em>

\_Yours in writing\_

\_theotherpianist\_

### 3. Chapter 3

\_Hello, theotherpianist back with a revised chapter three. I have spent the greater portion of four hours cross referencing it to the story in question. I hope this finds a better audience this time.

><em>

**\*\*This chapter contains the name of an actual Neimoidian Admiral and is \_cometpeltely canon\_. So to all of those who are complaining about the name being too similar it is completely canon. Please take your complaints elsewhere. I even included part of the reason why he's even mentioned.\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter Three:<p>

**\*\*WARNING! MULTIPLE SYSTEM FAILURE; ATMOSPHERIC BREECHEs DETECTED ON ALL DECKs! \*\***

**\*\*RECOMMEND IMMEDIATE EVACUATION OF ALL PERSONAL FROM VESSEL!  
\*\***

**\*\*Error: Critical calendar malfunction/ reboot sys. / November 22nd  
2559: 00:00 hours\*\***

**\*\*Allied Species CAS Class Carrier Salvation \*\***

The world was painfully gray. William was painfully aware of that fact as he struggled to lift his head above the snow that was now falling around his face. He was vaguely aware of someone calling his name. His helmet was detached from his face; really he ought to fix the seal on that thing.

He opened his eyes and took in the scene around him. The hangar was relatively clear except for a massive hole above him where snow steadily fell through. Two massive fires on both sides of the ship outside the now unshielded exposed hangar bay doors lit up the area for about 100 meters. An icy wind was ripping through the unshielded bay with a mighty howl. A blizzard looked like it was setting in.

"About time you woke up." Ripa growled behind him.

William turned around to see Ripa grinning.

"How long haveâ€|?"

"You were only out for a couple minutes. You had the fortune to be standing underneath an entire section of plating when it collapsed on you after we ceremoniously landed. We've evacuated the wounded and dead to the rear half of the ship. Our reactors are currently in emergency mode and only powering interior lighting, heating, the armory and what's left of communications."

William looked around at the dark interior of the hangar lit up harshly and nodded once.

"Well any place that didn't sustain major damage." Ripa said as an afterthought.

"And where is that?" he asked.

Ripa ignored his comment.

"Where's Sarah?" he queried.

"Right here Captain." She said as she materialized on the holoprojector right next to them. "Enjoy your ride?" she said sarcastically with a smile.

"Loved every minute of it, I have to say though, that was one for the history books with modulating the plasma to produce a magnetic levitating effect so we didn't all die." William said getting to his feet. Noticing his shields were down he restarted the system. He

waited until with a pop and fizzle his shields rematerialized.

Ripa chuckled but suddenly fell silent.

William's face flashed with concern. He had learned that to trust a Sangheili's senses often meant the difference between life and death.

"Hold friend, something's coming." He growled.

"Sarah, have anything on sensors?" William said groggily as he shook off exhaustion.

"Scanning." She said her avatar bowed its head in thought.

Ripa gripped his Energy Swords suddenly wary.

"Nothing on long range, butâ€¦ wait," her face showed confusion for a second.

"What?" Ripa and William said simultaneously.

"Oh, you're not going to like this. Scanners are picking up multiple unidentified contacts in the air descending towards us. Scans indicate they may beâ€¦"

She didn't finish as a howl swept through the air and something in the air above them fired. They all turned to look up to see ruby red bolts of energy spinning towards them.

"Fighters! Incoming!" roared Ripa

William yanked his helmet on ignoring some of the snow that landed on his neck. The HUD lit up and he activated the flashlights on his helmet. He by instinct grabbed the two M6 magnums from his legs and fired alternating shots. He must have hit it right because it spiraled downwards in a ball of flame and crashed on top of the Carrier it gave a muffled thump as it landed.

The bolts connected with the ground directly ahead of them knocking the two of them back.

"Now would be a good time to leave!" Sarah said concerned.

William ran over to the holoprojector and yanked Sarah's chip out and into the slot of the back of his helmet. He registered the icy sensation and then turned and ran with Ripa.

"Sarah! See if you can launch some flares or lights or something! Give us a little more light to work with!" He yelled. He vaulted over a pile of rubble and into the bowels of the wreckage.

"Just how many things want to kill us today?" \_He thought as he ran down the length of the ship.

He ran through a room where a bunch of Marines sat.

"We're under attack!" roared Ripa scaring the nearest Marine right next to him jumping back in fright.

As if to emphasize his point the ship echoed loudly as another fighter fired at the wreckage again.

"What theâ€¦!" cried another Marine.

"You heard me! We're being attacked!" growled a Sergeant. He yanked on the bolt of his MA5D and ran down a hallway leading his squad.

"All of you get the word around the ship!" yelled William. He grabbed another MA5 from off the ground next to a dead body and racked it. Satisfied it had ammunition he ran off to spread the word.

Over the Battle-Net William heard various other people yelling the same thing about being attacked."

"The main hangar is the one closest breach to our position!" Ripa shouted as he and William dashed down another corner. As they made their way through the destroyed ship, they passed various scenes of death and carnage.

Ripa stopped suddenly again.

"Look there!" He hissed stopping Will. He gestured to a pile of corpses in front of him. There was a trio of Sangheili minors and two Jackals that all had burn marks from something that resembled an energy based weapon. Most eerily were the slash marks on some of their necks. Something had cut them.

"These bodies are fresh!" look at the blood stains.

"The blood's fresh as well." whispered Will to Ripa. Noticing a faint trickle of blood coming from one of the Kig-Yars necks.

"Something's not right." said Will again. They both proceeded along carefully not making a sound. They heard a scuttling sound and all of a sudden the two stopped with weapons raised. Will flicked his head towards the ceiling. They proceeded like nothing had happened. Will gave a silent nod and the two of them fired at the ceiling. Suddenly six black figures dropped down from the ceiling with blood red eyes. One gave a howling scream and pounced on Will. Knocking him to the floor.

He got a good look at it. It wasn't a living combatant but rather a robot and its eyes were a giant pair of menacing red colored photoreceptors, a quarter ton robot with an arm mounted blade of what was obviously razor sharp metal struggling to slice his neck open. He struggled in its vice like grip as he struggled to get free. He used his augmented strength to his advantage and flipped it off smacking it into the wall where it was skewered by a jutting piece of metal. It howled and struggled to extricate itself which didn't help its situation tearing off its sword arm in a shower of sparks.

He rolled the other way knocking a second off its feet trying to catch his breath. Ripa took the advantage slamming into his attacker and stabbing the one Will had just knocked off with an ignited energy sword bisecting it in half.

"Behind you!" roared Ripa as he gouged another's legs and sword arm off. It fired a shot from its blaster which ricocheted off the wall

and took the photoreceptors of another out. It blindly wobbled about until it was knocked to the floor where it was smashed by Ripa as he swung at another disarming its sword and slicing the blaster.

Will rolled backwards and smashed another robot behind him back and onto the floor. He came up from the roll and flipped the robot again and hurled it into the bulwark. The two armored combats grabbed each other and clutched each other. He saw in his peripheral vision another robot coming up at him. He swung it around and its ally stabbed and shot the one Will was grappling with. It shuddered and fell lifeless.

Will followed with by grappling the one now bearing down on him which was as far as it got as picked up a piece of fallen metal and swung to the sides filling the passageway. The robot tried by countering with a sword strike but it overshot. Will closed the gap with the sheet of metal rupturing it and caught the arms of the killing machine knocking the gun from its hands and with a heave, severing the sword from its other arm. It gave a screech of fury and it punched Will. He gave a grunt as it smashed into his torso and the shield bar whined as it instantly drained somewhat. The robot on the other hand looked up surprised as it crushed the crystalline layers of metal leaving its hand mangled it and making it useless.

It recovered quickly and savagely sliced at him with the other arm. William ducked and it overshot giving him enough time to deliver a solid kick that gave a mighty CLANG before buckling it underneath the weight of the shield and armored boot.

It staggered and Will pinned it to the ground before it could do anything else and in a single fluid motion pulled one of the Magnums of his leg and fired. The round penetrated the photoreceptor and embedded itself in the brain. The cranial case shattered from impact. Will shot it again with the other as it twitched.

Ripa had meanwhile ensured the remaining attackers were completely dead.

"Who the heck are these people?" he asked as he reloaded both of the Magnums he had and placed his fallen Assault Rifle on his back.

"Are they even people? Looks like they're all machines." observed Ripa with a scowl.

The two ran through the rest of the ship making sure they weren't being followed by whatever those things were.

"What is our condition?" Ripa asked a Sangheili General as the two ran into the main hangar, who was organizing the defenses in the massive space.

"Ill," replied the General, the moonlight and snow reflecting off his golden armor. "Conservative estimates list half of our number perishing in the crash along with the Shipmaster and Fleetmaster. Nearly all of our vehicles were destroyed, or made completely useless. However, if we can maintain strategic positions throughout the ship, keeping an even number of supplies flowing in-between them, then we should be able to hold out against their ground assault until help arrives. The Shipmaster put me in charge as he died. I would appreciate it if you were to help organize the defenses. Ahh! We have

a Demon!" he growled in approval as he spotted the Spartan.

"Where do you want me?" Will asked. The General grunted and pointed to a spot where they were completely exposed.

"I want those who are qualified to use the few vehicles we have left. There are a dozen Banshee fighters in the central hangar and a trio of Wraith's. I need brothers in them now! I want a squad down there retrieving plasma turrets that can be salvaged and set them up all along the perimeter." \_He ordered over the Battle-net.

"Sirs!" Sarah said over what remained of the Battle-net within the Carrier. "I'm detecting multiple dropships of unknown origin entering the area! Launching flares and activating all exterior lights!"

"She's right! Incoming! Twelve o'clock high!" shouted a female Marine on a plasma turret, as it roared to life. The world suddenly lit up outside as thousands of floodlights activated themselves lighting up the pale cold world outside. William dashed over and looked up. There were indeed many of what looked like dropships roaring overhead and deploying their contents fire from the wreck.

William yelled for the soldiers to duck as a fighter streaked towards them firing its guns. One caught William as he ducked and he watched as he shields were almost depleted. He grunted from the force of impact and after a second popped up again. The Hunter pair stationed there immediately fired their arm mounted weaponry and the fighter tumbled to the ground in a heap sealing up part of a hole in the wreckage. Behind him a pair of Banshee's broke through the safety of the Carrier and emerged into the outside world.

A dropship had now landed and enemy soldiers were making their way out, firing out the hole in the hull. Their fire was very inaccurate though,

"Kig-Yar in front! Shields down!" roared the General as he systematically fired a Particle Beam rifle to great effect.

"Heads up! They've got laser mounted weaponry! Keep your heads down!" William ordered and the Allied Species soldiers quickly returned fire, the enemy soldiers quickly collapsing underneath the strain. But as they fell, they did not bleed, for they wereâ€¦

"Machines?" shouted William, as he fired a burst from his MA5. "Again? Is this an army entirely made of these things?!" he asked incredulously to Ripa standing next to him firing with a Carbine.

"Not the time Spartan, look!" shouted Ripa. More of the dropships were landing, but these ones were landing even farther away, out of range of most small arms, with the possible exception of a sniper. More machines, some taller and gray, some silver, and some spherical that seemed to roll and deploy in spherical bubbles of energy. "Unless I am mistaken," said Ripa "I would say they are attempting to place a siege on us."

Will subconsciously felt sick. Staring out at the dropships numbering well above several dozen he felt his stress levels spike suddenly.



"Watch the rollers!" a Minor roared as it leaned out of cover to fire a burst from a Covenant Carbine only to be shot dead by one of the taller machines. Around him the other Sangheili roared in anger and immediately charged forward annihilating the offending attacker. They took up positions outside the Carrier behind two wrecked Phantoms.

William grabbed the Covenant Carbine from the recently deceased Sangheili and fired a shot desperate to now seize their advantage of distance. Despite the fact that they were out of range of the Carbine, one of the machines stumbled backwards and fell over, not to get up again. He switched targets to a couple of the taller gray robots that were closer and fired until they collapsed with smoking holes inside them discarding the now empty Carbine.

Ripa laughed bitterly, "Good shot brother! But I hope you have more in you, we shall need many more than that."

"Let the Hunters take care of that." Will said gesturing to the massive aliens who were proving to be the most helpful.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Upper Atmosphere:<strong>

"I understand my mistake General Grievous," said Nemoidian Captain Mur Tuuk cautiously as he stared at the bleached, white armorplast face of General Grievous. He gave a shudder as those yellow sallow eyes stared back at him unforgivingly.

"But I have a plan to rectify my error. May I remind you, you sent a, message to the fleet? Already I have droids swarming the downed ship. They will kill everything down there, no record of our deed here. Better yet, we might even be able to fool their leaders into thinking that the Republic did it."

"Mark my words, if this situation grows out of control, it will come down on your head! Your luck on Rhyloth has only extended so far. If you fail I will kill you." With that, the angry cyborg general, walked out of the room.

Captain Mur Tuuk gulped nervously, he was not having a good day. What started as a low key invasion had turned into a slaughter against this unknown foe. He gulped again and tapped a button of the armrest of his chair. "Double the number of droids to be deployed," he said. He looked as another Banking Class Frigate exploded as it swerved to avoid missile strike only to hit a Lucrehulk class Battleship which started flaming until its reactor overloaded and detonated.

He growled about the incompetence of his slowly dwindling fleet. That gargantuan, single, and in his opinion ugly vessel that had remained had taken out many of the fleets assets through a combination of utilizing slingshot maneuvers around the Planet's moon and then running around in orbit of the planet. Its two smaller escort ships were providing no entrance to the fighters and bombers he had sent.

A fact that was becoming painfully clear to the Neimoidian Admiral as

it watched the ship turn away again and begin fleeing again after reappearing from a cloud of Vulture droids. Suddenly he was shocked as it suddenly disappeared into the void it loved to create and reappeared a second later right in front of the Neimoidian's ship. He yelled and as he watched stunned he caught a glimpse of someone, probably the Captain on the bridge that was grinning wickedly. His shock turned into fury as it raced sidelong by his fleet and unleashed a firestorm from all starboard side weapons, which from the amount of fire erupted was a lot. Just how was this thing surviving?

The fiery salvo of railgun rounds, AAA helix guns, and ship to ship cannons on the side at close range started ripping apart more of his fleet. Another volley of missiles stopped a dozen or so more but thankfully didn't destroy them.

The Neimoidian Admiral was appalled.

"I want that slugthrower dead! Order the fleet to boost their particle shields! I want \_nothing\_ getting through."

He was slightly relieved when the vessel fired its horrifically powerful slugthrowers again and to have his fleet not suffer any casualties.

"FIRE ALL BATTERIES!" he roared in a triumphant fury. His mouth stretched into a smile as his fleet unleashed its own storm of turbolaser bolts. His face fell sour again as the manifestation of shielding on the ship absorbed the damage. He was pleased after a moment to observe that it had hurt the vessel as much as it had his as an explosion rocked the side of it. It suddenly turned and ran again albeit much slower than before.

"Attention all ships. To anybody that can disable that ship I will give you 50,000 credits plus a spot on the war council! Just knock out that ship so that they can't send reinforcements. At for goodness sake someone find me some Intel on who in the nine Corellian \*\*\*\*'s is operating that ship! Captain Tuuk out." He finished his transmission then yelled feeling a sense of dread creep up realizing he just broadcast an open message by accident. He started praying that the Republic wasn't picking this up.

The only time he had ever felt this sick with fear was when he was placed to oversee the blockade of Rhyloth and prevent the Republic from providing Humanitarian Aid with Military support. He had been way too proud and arrogant when negotiating with Skywalker, the \_Hero Without Fear\_ as the Holo-net was now dubbing him. He had though he had effectively countered Anakin's brashness when Anakin attempted to deceive him with an offer to surrender. Only he was shocked to see the Jedi use his own ship as a weapon smashing apart his Command ship.

It had been his Apprentice that had taken the crotian pastries for the day by angling a single Venator sideways and at an angle to absorb fire from the rest while fighters and bombers took out the rest of the blockade.

He had escaped barely on a shuttle but that had nearly cost him his life when he was forced to endure the wrath of his superiors. Now his second chance was quickly going away. He really hoped the Republic

didn't pick this up...

\* \* \*

><p>CT-2282-440WA "Watcher", was bored. He had been stuck on this small Republic Cruiser who's purpose was to silently recon what was going on in the systems nearest the Confederacy's threat. The ship he was on was coming out of hyperspace to the Tobali system to pick up a probe and retrieve its data. Nothing particular special.<p>

He looked out the viewports as it transitioned and almost instantly swerved to avoid hitting the wreck of something.

He and the Pilots suddenly cursed with the other Clone's on board as they avoided the near death impact.

"What the?" he exclaimed as his clone brothers ran towards the same viewport.

The wreckage of at least eight different Separatist vessels lay strewn about in chaos with evidence of something incredibly violent having been used against him.

"What's going on here?" asked the Sergeant as he walked out of the comm room.

He stopped dead in his tracks. "Send a report to Corruscant, to the Jedi. Tell them the Separatists have invaded the system!"

"Roger!" said another Clone running off to complete the assignment.

"Wait, Sarge. How were they destroyed? There's nothing that matches any turbolaser residue on any of these vessels!" said a Clone looking over a scanner.

"Picking up some strange activity on the other side!" said the Pilot. We'll be able to see it in five seconds. Watcher and the Sergeant moved to the other viewports with the other clones.

They all gasped.

Ahead of them surrounding the planet Rhen Var was a firestorm. There was one single ship of an alien make with two smaller ones flanking it engaging the Confederacy in an explosive battle that was quickly turning sour.

"Who the \*\*\*\* are these people!" said Watcher in a form of mute awe.

It was a sight to see as the three ships traded fire with the Confederacy, and seemed to be winning this engagement slightly.

"Pilot, you getting this?" asked the Sergeant shocked.

"Yes sir."

"Sarge!" We're picking up a distress beacon said another Clone with a pair of headphones on. The Sergeant walked over and listened for a

second.

"Tell the Jedi we need assistance in the Tobali system! We have a First Contact Situation in progress and there are survivors on the surface that need help and relief, now!"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>RSS Resolute, Thanium System<strong>

**\*\*Outer Rim Regions\*\***

Lightyears away from that on the bridge of the RSS Resolute, two Jedi sat in council with a Republic Admiral when suddenly a Clone Officer ran up to them.

"Sirs, urgent transmission from Corruscant."

"Let's hear it then." said the Admiral.

They walked over and keyed the holoprojector to see the blue visage of Mace Windu appear.

"Greetings Master Windu." The bearded figure of Obi-Wan Kenobi said in greeting.

"\_And to you Master Kenobi, Skywalker, and Admiral Yularen. We have important business to discuss that requires immediate attention."\_

"What would that be Master?"

"\_We have received reports from our Scouts in the Tobali System that Rhen Var has been invaded and some unknown power entered the fray accidentally judging by the nature of communications between the two. There are survivors from another ship that crashed on a surface. The Separatists are sieging the wreckage. Your task, is to ensure they make it back to alive to Galactic City for questioning."\_

"Understood Master." Said Obi-Wan.

"\_You have done a great service by finding this Confederate Industrial planet in this sector but this is more important, link up with more ships and go immediately to the Tobali system, others can handle the siege. May the Force be with you."\_

He closed the connection and Obi-Wan sat in a nearby niche in the wall. with his hand clasping his chin in deep thought.

"Did I hear that right?" asked Anakin. "Tell me I heard that right."

"It appears we are not alone in the Galaxy." Admiral Yularen noted.

"Admiral, prepare to link up with the fleet. Send a message to the other fleets, siphon off as many ships as you can muster. Anakin? Tell Rex and Cody to prepare landing parties for arrival." Obi-Wan said.

"How long until we reach Rhen Var?" asked Anakin.

"The question is not how long," said Obi-Wan turning to face the empty space before him outside the bridge.

"It's can they hold out in time?"

\* \* \*

><p><em>There you go! Hope this appeases you guys. I'm sorry for not realizing the error in this. I will try and fix this as it comes. Thanks for patience as well through this period of technical difficulties. And special thanks to <em>\_\*\*Battle Bruva Volks\*\*\_ and \_\*\*phantom00 \*\*\_for noticing the errors. More fixed chapters to come soon. Remember to read and review. \_

\_Yours in writing, \_

\_thotherpianist\_

#### 4. Chapter 4

Hello, \_\*\*\_thetheotherpianist\_\*\*\_ back with a longer chapter for you! First off again, \_

\_Wow. I broke 2500 hits today, thanks a lot for reading. I'm glad the public has been more receptive to the updated and revised Chapter Three. I thank you all for our patience. Now we'll move onto reviews. Since the majority were on the old chapter three I might as well re answer them.\_

\*\*\_ww1990ww:\_\*\*\_I get your point. I'll see if I can't include that somewhere. Yes. There probably would be some animosity towards the UNSC and the Allied Species as a whole. You touched on a point of citizenry that I was debating on including. Your review has given the go ahead. Thanks for that. Yes it is indeed true that an Allied Species/Imperial (Separatist, etc.) war would be that taken to the extreme with no Halo event to turn it around. I'd like to tell you how I plan on solving that but that would be spoiling forty or so chapters into the future. You're on the right track to where my thoughts were. Great comments. \_

\*\*\_Guest:\_\*\*\_ are you the same guest who's reviewed since the beginning?\_

\*\*\_Earthpatriot117:\_\*\*\_why would I not include Hunter's? They're also called the Lekgolo if you didn't know that. They're freaking walking tanks. Glad you liked the boulder.\_

\*\*\_.75873:\_\*\*\_Even though I hadn't read Erttheeking's fic before I saw no purpose in continuing to plagiarize something already there. An update and revision, I though, was necessary.\_

\*\*\_Guest:\_\*\*\_I hope you're a different guest. I agree the Dauntless is totally awesome. There isn't a lot of action where you see what its capable of besides in the last chapter. I hoped Will's encounter with the Commando Droids (kudos to you that guessed it) satisfied that. He'll be doing some more in the future. As for a POV on Del

Rio? No. That in my mind would just be too weird. Thanks with the input of Kenobi and Skywalker. I made there appearance way to short.

—

**\*\*\_balom: \_\*\***It is my goal to ensure that the UNSC isn't as overpowered as in the other fics. (That's just my opinion) I am going to cut down on that in the later chapters. \_

**\_\*\*gwb99:\*\***\_\_ Thank you for noticing. You did correctly point out this story is the **\_\_\*\*117th.\*\***\_\_ You get a cookie. I didn't notice that until you said so. \_

**\*\*\_Illuviar and Guests:\_\*\***Thanks for your comments. I will try to update once a week. If not twice. I can't guarantee more than that.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter Four<p>

**\*\*Crash site: CSS **\*\*\_\*\*Salvation\*\*\_\*\***: (Under SIEGE by unknown enemy combatants)\*\***

**\*\*Unknown Arctic Planet, \*\***

**\*\*November 2nd, 2559: 03:15 hours\*\***

Tired. That's what all William could think of right now as he reloaded another magazine into a Needle rifle and fired. The massive jagged crystal stuck itself in the abdomen of one of the smaller ones before detonating in a purple mist sending a billion shards of razor sharp crystalline shards into the circuitry of the droid effectively killing it.

As he ducked to avoid enemy fire a Jackal was instantly killed as a blaster bolt caught it's shield making it recoil and flail backwards until a second shot from one of the larger robots caught it instantly killing it cauterizing the wound. The defenders of the Carrier were being slowly whittled down bit by bit as lucky shots from the haphazardly firing machines claimed lives. And there were so many of them.

He growled in frustration as yet another dropship swung overhead. He was satisfied when one of the surviving Banshees' swung around from its course and gave it a healthy dose of twin-linked repeating plasma cannon's. It simply caught fire and stopped flying proceeding to start ramming into forces below.

The individual forces, with the exception of the those freakish things he and Ramore encountered, the taller gray ones, and the "Destroyers" were pretty non-lethal, even comical sometimes. David had watched with some grim amusement as a group of them threw up their hands and ran as the dropship proceeded to crash into them wrecking them.

The others were downright lethal. Suddenly a whole squad of them appeared wielding jetpacks of all things. Several Grunts were caught in the ambush. The number of fighting combatants in the carrier suddenly decreased dramatically as the defenders tried in vain to suppress this new threat.

"\_Fall back\_" roared the General over the Battle-Net. "\_All units fall back to the inside! Get the wounded inside and seal all major entrances! Air support and armor fall back!" \_

Will ducked again as one of the taller droids marched into the hangar firing as it went.

"Go! We'll cover you!" he yelled to the survivors behind him. The Sangheili general emerged from the other side shields flaring as a couple bolts impacted. Behind him the surviving conglomerate of Elites, Grunts, Jackals, and a couple Marine's from the Dauntless' compliment retreated into the bowels of the ship. The Hunter pair reluctantly retreated filling up the rest of the corridor with their massive bulk and shields creating an almost impenetrable wall of angry Hunter.

"I need one of you to retrieve a heavy weapon from the armory and help seal this area off!" he roared as he fired a burst from his dual Plasma Rifles.

"I can!" Ripa replied as he gunned down another with a scavenged plasma pistol.

"Go!" yelled William popping out of cover. He mowed down the enemies in their immediate vicinity tossing a liberated plasma grenade farther away at a cluster of the flying taller gray robots. The more Will fought against these machines the word droid seemed to become an apt fit for the mass of machinery ahead of him. Mindless, ruthless, effective.

Several of the taller ones collapsed and tripped four of the smaller droids behind it. They collapsed to deck and were quickly eliminated by a burst from the General. The grenade Will had thrown detonated in a shower of whitish blue plasma that melted through armor and circuitry charring the interior as the plasma ate its way through the metal. The bodies of the droids effectively blocked off part of the entrance into the hangar and more were still adding to it building up the wall.

It was in vain as Will ejected his final clip from his gun and picked up a Needler from the deck. He quickly popped out of cover and fired a burst. The pink crystals locked onto the nearest and detonated causing one of the droids to be decapitated. It fell lifeless but was ignored as its comrades simply stepped over it.

"Sarah! Status report! Where are they entering?"

"The biggest entrances are here in the main hangar and in the rear which has been torn open." She answered. "Duck!" she yelled suddenly. William did so and was rewarded with missing a barrage of bolts of energy to the head.

"\_We're being overrun in the aft section!" \_came the cry of a desperate Sangheili.

"Fall back! Seal off any and all entrances you can!" yelled the General as he knocked another trio of droids down with the heated plasma shots. He cursed as the weapon stopped firing, its power cells depleted.

"I got it!" Will yelled as he finished off the droids the General had been firing at.

Suddenly four of the rolling droids sped into the hangar.

"Get down!" he yelled at the General.

But it was too late as they unfurled and deployed within their spheres of protection as they filled the area where the General was with a stygian inferno of fire.

Will yelled but he heard no sound come out as he watched the shields take many of the bolts. He jerked and suddenly collapsed armor steaming in many places.

Behind him a massive roar was given and twisting behind he saw Ripa staring at the corpse of the General carrying two Fuel Rod guns. Will was somewhat surprised by this. Ripa had before expressed to him great disgust at what he called heavy weapons, citing there was no need for any skill with them. One only needed to point and fire.

He tossed one of them towards Will giving another roar which shook the ship. Will caught the hefty weapon and immediately filled the space with the Destroyers with radioactive bursts. The shields fizzled out and they exploded from the force of impact of the rounds.

Ripa passed him in a charge. He dropped the cannon and ignited both his swords and in a stunning display began twirling through the ranks of droids slicing them, creating white hot gouges in metal. The droids attempted firing on him but he was moving too fast to be hit. Will backed off as Ripa avenged the fallen General.

Not one to be outdone and left behind Will strapped the Fuel Rod gun to his back's magnetic clamp and picked up another Needler and a Plasma Rifle. He charged as well firing the two of them at different targets. He ran and flipped over one of the tall droids and emptying bolts of energy into the top of it landed and came up rolling. He fired full automatically with his Needler and caused numerous combatants to suddenly blossom and fall consumed in a purple mist with circuits and drivers torn and shredded from the jagged crystalline needles. He came up from the roll his rifle spewing plasma as fast as he would let it. His shields whined as the heat from the plasma began to scorch him.

Suddenly too hot to handle he chucked the steaming and hissing weapon firing a needle as he did so into it. It buried itself in and suddenly a group of droids found themselves bursting apart from a make shift plasma grenade. The needler empty he grabbed one of the weapons from off the droids. His armor and Sarah (who was currently coordinating defense) took a second to read it and put it up on his HUD.

He fired. He was somewhat amazed when a ruby red bolt of energy left with almost no recoil and dropped one of the droids to the Earth. In a second he scooped up another and fired. He ran catching up to Ripa droids falling on all sides. Suddenly Will found himself outside of the hangar. A fierce wind was dropping visibility to almost nothing whipping up waves of snow and ice to twirl about. A few bare patches



of sky winked at them.

The duo cautiously watched the surrounding territory looking for a sign of movement. Suddenly the figures of two "tanks" appeared.

They both simultaneously swiveled towards them.

"Back!" cried Will as they realized they were completely exposed.

He hit the snow covered ground as a massive blast shook the ground as both tanks fired. He turned it into a staggered roll and ran for the safety of the Carrier firing the fuel rod as he did so. One of the tanks exploded. Its partner tried to take revenge but missed.

"Seal the entrance!" Ripa grunted as he found safety behind one of the curved walls.

As the two warriors dove inside and sealed off the entrance with a blast from the fuel rod they missed the sudden appearance of five white lights blinking into existence high above the atmosphere.

Will tossed the droid weapon to the side. It felt awkward to be using a weapon by the enemy and after all, there was still an entire armory of weapons left.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>RSS Resolute and "Rescue Fleet"<strong>

\*\*Space above Rhen Var\*\*

\*\*Tobali System, Outer Rim. \*\*

"Stang!" cried one of the troopers onboard the Resolute's bridge as it reverted to real space.

Obi-Wan Kenobi had to admit that comment described what he was seeing everywhere.

All around him in front of the small rescue fleet lay the wreckage of numerous Separatist vessels, all competing in some grotesque competition to see who died the most violently. One vessel in particular was ripped apart by multiple explosions leaving small fragments of warship everywhere. The back portion was all lit on fire, a fiery display of \*\*\*\*.

"What the-!" gasped Anakin as he observed the scene.

"What on Corruscant did this?" asked Padawan Ashoka Tano who had come up to the bridge after being recalled.

"I don't know but we're about to find out." Her Master Anakin said.

"Generals! Incoming contacts slipping around the far left side of the planet!" yelled a trooper as three blips came on screen.

The Jedi and the Admiral who was joined by Clone Captain "Rex" and Commander Cody all crowded around to witness. Suddenly around the far side three ships of an intimidating build hurtled around. At the

center was the largest, a monster almost four kilometers long in length surrounded by two much smaller vessels there were barely a tenth of its length.

"Can we identify it?" asked Admiral Wullf Yularen as the contacts sped around the planet in high orbit.

"No Sir! It doesn't match anything in our databases!"

The Admiral cursed.

"Look at behind it!" another Clone cried.

All eyes looked to behold four, six, no twelve ships chasing the three ships.

The bridge flew into a frenzy of action as the Separatist vessels spotted the Republic fleet. They broke off and began to approach the Republic fleet.

"Admiral! Can you establish contact with them, we need to be on the ground!" said Kenobi as he turned to leave.

"Yes General. Good luck to you." He said as the Jedi, Rex, and Cody ran out of the bridge towards the hangar.

Ahsoka was still trying to comprehend the situation. She had been sleeping when she had been summoned to the Bridge only to find out they were en route to a planet seldom touched by either side in which some faction of unknown origin had somehow angered the Separatists into attacking causing one of their ships to crash on the surface. They had been given orders to ensure that survivors made it back to Coruscant for questioning.

Ahsoka had her doubts. As she suited up in cold weather gear she seriously doubted that there would be any survivors. \_"I mean the droid army had been sieging for at least six hours right?" \_

She was snapped out of thought by the call to battle stations being blared throughout the ship. She boarded a Gunship with Masters Skywalker and Kenobi. On board various attachments of the 501st and 222nd legions filed into Gunships and plunged out of the hangar into the coldness of space as the Resolute and the other ships moved to engage the enemy.

Gradually she felt the tug of the planet's gravity increase as they entered atmosphere and less of the artificial gravity of the Gunship.

"Generals incoming transmission from the Admiral." Their Pilot reported.

"Go ahead!" said Anakin over the howl of the wind outside as they approached where the distress signal had been coming from.

\_"Generals? Good, we contacted the unknown faction. While the Admiral is a very proud fellow and at first was openly hostile; we were only able to communicate briefly. We have formed a temporary alliance. I'm transmitting the location of the crash site and some brief data to

your men now.\_\_

"Thank you Admiral, good luck" said Obi-Wan.

"\_To you as well Generals. Yularen out."\_ He said closing the connection.

The gunship bucked suddenly jarring everyone awake.

"What's going on?" Ahsoka asked.

"Bad weather making it a little bumpy. My apologies sir." said the Pilot. "ETA is five minutes."

"Looks like the Seps got hammered." said Ahsoka as they fly past the wreckage of a Commerce Guild frigate.

"How did they take out so many with so few?" asked Obi-Wan further breaking the silence.

"I guess we'll figure that out." Responded Anakin at a loss of anything else to say looking at a data-pad with some newly acquired intel.

"Initial data says the crew is part of a collective known as the Allied Species." Ahsoka read off. "Most of the factions use plasma based weaponry but there's one faction, the UNSC that's perfected the use of slugthrowers." said Captain Rex reading a holopad with the information on it.

At this the Clones in the gunship started laughing.

"Slugthrower's?" one of them snorted.

"How ancient can they get?" said another punching another on the shoulder.

"Ancient enough to take out all those vessels in orbit. Now shut your mouths troopers! There is something to be learned from them. If they can do that much with what they have and we have all this? What does this say?" barked Cody.

The troopers instantly fell silent.

"Figures we'd have to save a bunch of slugthrowers." Said one of the troopers.

The rest of the trip then was relatively uneventful. The air of anticipation was thick.

Suddenly they broke through the clouds and suddenly Ahsoka gasped.

Below them was a large vessel at least six kilometers. But with the darkness outside and the wreckage strewn out slightly it was hard to tell. There was a certain aesthetic beauty to it even in defeat and destruction. One could easily tell it was built for war but one could also tell that there was an intentional beauty to it.

She could also due to the presence of exterior floodlights that they were being besieged from a massive droid army. Multiple flashes of yellow, green, blue, and red indicated there was some sort of defense organized and survivors still.

The Gunships accelerated towards the ground. The Pilot announced they were about to land. The troopers readied their weapons and the Jedi their lightsabers.

The Gunship landed with a thump and the bay lights turned green. The doors swung open and the Republic charged forth into the storm.

Ahsoka lit her lightsaber and ran forward cutting through the now confused droids. She watched as Rex and Cody led the troopers forward. She and the two Jedi Masters began cutting their way through a group of droids attempting to enter the ship via a small hole in the exterior.

"Guard this!" yelled Anakin as the group of Clones following them approached the hole. The immediately got to work setting up portable defenses.

"Into the wreckage! We're exposed out here!" Kenobi yelled through the howling wind.

The three ran into the inside of the ship and immediately Ahsoka gasped again. The ship was beautiful inside and out. This fact was marred by the presence of several, definitely, alien bodies. They were tall, muscular warriors incased in armor. They had split mandibles and were vaguely similar to a species she had met on an assignment to Wild Space.

"Listen!" Hissed Anakin suddenly as they advanced slowly.

Ahead of them a group of Commando droids were probing ahead. Further ahead a voice, deep and somewhat guttural growled a warning.

"I think more of those abominations are here. But where, I can't see them on motion trackers at all!"

Without warning the group all lunged towards the sound. Soundly a flurry of loud bangs filled the hallway along with the hiss of something else.

"Come on!" yelled Ahsoka running towards the sounds of the chaos.

Obi-Wan and Anakin had no choice but to follow.

Ahsoka rounded the bend to see a somewhat reptilian looking warriors bisecting a droid with the most intricate lightsaber she had ever seen, dual bladed in a single direction, a white glowing iridescent triangle of shaped plasma that left a ghostly contrail. It sizzled as it burned away the droid impaled on its blade.

Behind him stood the tallest figure in armor she had ever seen, taller than any Mandalorian she had met. It carried two dual weapons of some sort. Probably slug throwing pistols of some kind. It also stood barely shorter than the other warrior. Through the force she

could feel in an extreme amount of agitation and stress from the shorter of the two. Something was going to snap soon if she went about this the wrong way...

\* \* \*

><p>"I don't understand why you have to smash into them. A sword is just as lethal on its own. Why even carry one if all you do is stomp on them?" Will asked as he examined another one of those freakish droids that had attacked them. It now had the large imprint of Ripa's hoof.<p>

Instead of answering he froze.

"Hold demon, something else is here." Ripa warned.

The two spun around one eighty to each other and scanned the opposite sides of the room. Satisfied there wasn't anything immediately there Will relaxed slightly.

"Uhm, excuse me." A female voice said.

Ripa spun around so fast Will thought he would have whiplash. As it was he immediately snapped both of his M6G's up to bear on a young, teenage looking alien. Behind two human males in cold weather gear holding two cylindrical objects ran up behind her wary.

The two sides stared each other down.

"Whoa whoa whoa- let's put the weapons down for a second. The eldest one said in a non-confrontational voice.

"And why should I do that?" Will said every nerve focused on the three human figures.

Suddenly an explosion ripped apart a wall corridor to reveal two much taller cloaked droids wielding massive staffs snarling with an electric current.

"Magnaguards!" yelled the younger man.

The three figures ignited three swords of some type that glowed similar to an energy sword and went on the attack.

Will ducked as one launched a savage swipe and fired eight times. The world descending into what had been dubbed 'Spartan Time'. The rounds bounced off and moving Will made to grab a Plasma Rifle off the ground when suddenly the world reverted to real time and Will had to grab the staff to avoid being smacked with it. He again found himself wrestling. Ripa had charged and succeeded in loping of its head turning thinking his opponent was done when suddenly the droid attacked and knocked Ripa to the side with another strike.

William wrestled with this immensely powerful droid. Suddenly with a savage back hand that depleted his shields half way it broke out of it only to be impaled by one of the energy blades. The other one was quickly dealt with.

"Is that a good enough reason?" asked the Older man.

Suddenly exhausted Will retrieved his magnums off the ground and nodded once.

"Right now I'm Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi from the Jedi Council, We've come to rescue you.

"I don't understand. You're what? From where?" asked Will suddenly left with more questions.

"How much support did you bring?" probed Ripa cutting straight to the point.

"Five cruisers engaging the enemy who shot you down and several brigades of Clones."

"Clones?" asked Will not sure whether to believe what he was hearing. Behind him Ripa made a sound of disgust.

"I think it's clear we have much to talk about. I'm afraid you'll just need to have faith for the moment in us." Said the younger man.

Something beeped on the man named Kenobi's gear.

He pulled his arm towards him and activated his comlink.

"General Kenobi, what's the situation?"

"\_General, its Cody. We've routed the droids. The battle here is over. The Admiral is reporting that another ship came out of some bluish white portal and is offering assistance to us overhead. We are boarding the last ship now and we can have some face to face talk with the survivors in a few hours. \_

"Slipspace," said Ripa to Obi-Wan who simply nodded.

The second that this was said, a signal came through the Battle-Net to Ripa and William's helmets. "This is Moram 'Valam of the CCS-battle cruiser \_Twilight Transcendence.\_ We are here to rescue the survivors of the \_Salvation.\_"

"Thank you," breathed William finally.

\* \* \*

><p>Moram 'Valam, a Sangheili shipmaster sat in the Shipmaster's chair and looked out at the battlefield before him. Many corpses of a large fleet lay strewn about. 'Valam was impressed. It looked like the Dauntless had proved a worthy foe to their adversary.<p>

Ahead of him two sides were trading fire. One side with Red and Gold markings on their hulls made to protect two UNSC human frigates from being torn apart by the other side.

"We have a contact, far side of the planet coming around to meet us." A Major announced.

"Enemy?" 'Katar asked.

"It doesn't appear so. Wait, looks like it's a Human Ship."

The all turned and looked to see the Dauntless streaking around in orbit from the other side of the planet being pursued by a dozen or so warships. Aft and Stern weapon emplacements were firing at their pursuers to little avail.

"This is the UNSC Dauntless reading an allied warship in the vicinity! We need some help now!" Moram recognized the voice as Admiral Del Rio. He grimaced. He was one of the less honorable humans he had met but he was a good tactician employing one of the Humans best strategies to good use.

"Admiral this is Shipmaster 'Valam, hold fast and get behind us. There are another few warships from another faction currently engaging the enemy that shot you down I would advise you try and help."

"Copy that." Del Rio said defeated not entirely pleased that he wasn't out of the woods yet. Can you clear out the warships pursuing?"

"Request granted," said Moram as he closed the connection. "Charge pulse lasers and load plasma torpedoes. Target the bridge of the farthest ship. Launch our fighters and try and deploy surface parties to assist the Survivors. Raise communications with the other fleet and inform we are allied." He raised his hand to his com link again. "Shipmaster requesting Demon number 271, to please report to the hanger bay, you have a mission."

\* \* \*

><p>"Good thing you came," said William as he rested in the abandoned infirmary in the bowels of the Carrier. "Do you have any idea who the people who attacked us are?"<p>

"They're called the CIS, or Confederacy of Independent Systems." said Ahsoka.

"We've been in a civil war with them for nearly two and a half years now," said Obi-Wan

"Why did they attack us if they're fighting you?" asked William looking away from his M6 he held in his hand. "We were without power drifting through space. We didn't do anything except be here when they arrived.

"They probably confused you for a Republic vessel of some sorts said Anakin Skywalker as he observed with interest the interior of the carrier.

"These dishonorable Separatist's will pay for what they have done," said Ripa angrily. "When the leaders of the Allied Species hear of what has happened, there will be war."

"The Allied Species?" said Ahsoka a confused look on her face.

"The alliance that dominates our galaxy we're a part of," said William. "It consists of eight species spread across many hundreds of planets each.

Anakin seemed to be interested in something else that William had said however. "Why do you sound so satisfied?" he asked Ripa.

"Are you familiar with the concept of glassing a planet?" asked Ripa.

\* \* \*

><p>Moram 'Valam made his way through the <em>Twilight Transcendence <em>heading for the hanger bay. He had left his second in command on charge of engaging the enemy warships. The fact had occurred to him that they knew absolutely nothing about the organization commanding these ships or where they were, or anything else for that matter. Moram had devised a plan to find out these things. It would be a wise idea, he thought, to obtain some information before the Dauntless and the rest of the fleet could recover and wipe the slate of these infernal monsters.

Moram entered the hanger to find it mostly empty, most of the fighters and Phantoms having already been launched to provide support, but in the center one person stood. It was a Human, around seven feet tall, wearing white EVA armor with a Battle Rifle on her back. A demon. The Human saluted Moram as he drew close. She had been transferred aboard before they had ventured through to find the Salvation.

"Demon," said Moram "I have a mission for you. Board one of the enemy warships, and hack their database and download as much information as you can. That is your main objective, however if the opportunity presents itself, capture the commander of the warship and bring him back for interrogation."

The Spartan simply saluted and hopped on board the phantom with a fully prepped insertion squad... that was all there was to it. A Demon was always a good Commander of troops but an even better follower and achiever of objectives believed impossible.

Moram 'Valam had been lucky enough to have one of these super soldiers stationed on his ship. Said Spartan, Chelsea-271, had as much an interesting story as any of the other Veteran Spartans. She was almost rated "hyperlethal" with the rest of her team of which one of the members had been on board the Salvation...That didn't matter though she was a soldier. And as good a soldier as he had ever seen. That was how when he turned back to the birdge he knew that the warship was gone.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>CAS <strong>\_\*\*Salvation\*\*\_\*\* Crash site: 5:00 hours UNSC standard military time.\*\*

\*\*Arctic Planet Rhen Var,\*\*

\*\*Tobali System, Outer Rim Territories, Andromeda Galaxy.\*\*

"How many of these things to they have?" William asked as he observed the carnage on the battlefield.

"The Confederacy has billions of, if not more, droids in their army," said Obi-Wan. "What we see down here is not even a fraction of their



strength," he said as he walked over a pile of circuitry.

"So are you suggesting we really did manage to hold out against an army ten-thousand strong?" asked Will as he kicked a droid head into a snowbank.

"You apparently did."

Will felt another wave of that spine-tingling fear and dread wash over them. He had to stop and take a break he looked up and saw the last warship entering low orbit.

\* \* \*

><p>Chelsea examined the pile of disabled and destroyed machines before her. Seconds ago she had a close encounter where a droid wielding two "energy swords" had come charging at her. It had promptly hopped in a fighter and sped off before she could react. She entered the bridge without a fight. The guards had been destroyed already. She had limited time as the Dauntless had used its EMP cannon to knock out the ship and cripple it. Before long it would escape or smash into the ground. Which ever came first.<p>

"What do you meant you abandoned ship?" a reptilian alien shouted into his communications.

"This is your mess not mine," said the droid with the weird energy swords. "I told you if this situation grew out of control it would come down on your head. Now you will have to deal with these people on your own, and I don't think that they'll be very happy with you," and with that he severed the communications.

Mar Tuuk sat back in his chair, his heart thumping, and his two super battledroid bodyguards on either side of him sparking from an EMP pulse from a cannon aboard the vessel that had killed three quarters of his fleet single-handedly.. He was dead, he was outnumbered, and he was running on borrowed time as he attempted to restart the ship and get it out of its slow descent into atmosphere.

"Prepare to activate the hyperspace drive," he said to the two still alive and lucky droids manning the controls "Get us to Felucia! The droids at the consoles hastened to carry out his commands, typing at various control panels. But before they could finish, several shots rang out and the droids collapsed, several holes appearing in the back of their heads. Standing in the entrance to the bridge was a massive figure in white armor, holding some sort of gun in one hand and a glinting knife in the other.

The last thing he remembered was having something very hard hit him.

Chelsea watched as the thin green scaled alien collapse. She began to download everything to a datapad and transfer it back to the Shipmaster. When she was done she triggered the self-destruction sequence, and ran off to the escape pods.

\* \* \*

><p>"I think that's the last of them," said William as he leaned on a borrowed sniper rifle as they finished loading the wounded survivors

onboard phantoms.<p>

"Thank goodness for that," breathed Ahsoka moving her lightsaber through the air back onto her belt

"Telekinesisâ€| he said softly to himself. How?"

Ahsoka gave a little smile. "There are a lot of things we can learn from each other."

"Likewise." William said after a moment as he turned to survey the damage.

Before the two could continue their conversation, an object whistled through the air and slammed into the ground just outside the ship. Lightsabers reignited, and rifles were pointed at the pod, located just outside the wreckage.

"That's a Separatist escape pod!" A clone shouted as all approached. The door opened, and two figures exited, a seven foot tall Human in white EVA armor, with an unconscious reptilian creature over her shoulder.

Chelsea snapped her free arm to a salute when she caught sight of William.

"Lieutenant Gunther sir!" she said crisply.

William stared at her for a second.

"At ease Castle Four. I'm too tired for any formalities." He said wearily sitting down on a barrel of what used to hold plasma.

"Sir? I didn't realize you were down here. How did you?"

"It's a long story." He said waving her a side.

"Who is that by the way?" he asked pointing at Mar Tuuk.

"The enemy commanding officer," said Chelsea neutrally. "Pardon me for a second," she continued as she pressed her free hand to the side of her helmet. "Watch the fireworks people." The remaining CIS ship in orbit exploded. William whistled as he watched the spectacle.

"Most impressive," said Obi-Wan.

"\_Twilight Transcendence\_ this is Sierra-271, requesting pickup of a POW and survivors of the ship." She requested turning away. "So nowâ€|" said Ahsoka turning to Chelsea, "How are you? How do you know him?" she said pointing at William.

She chuckled and removed her EVA Helmet revealing her Golden Brown hair.

"It's a very long story isn't it El Tee." She said glancing at William and sharing a sad smile through polarized helmets. The two chuckled briefly.

"I suppose we have our leaders meet with you and we talk out what to

do next." Obi-Wan said at last.

"In the aftermath of an event like this the Representatives of the Allied Species will probably convene together and officially declare war on this Separatist Movement in your own galaxy. I imagine it would be prudent if you were to accompany us as we are unfamiliar with your galaxy." William said removing his helmet. "While you're at it I could offer a little bit of our organization on a more civilized place."

\* \* \*

><p><em>As always read and review. I hope you enjoyed an expanded chapter.<br>\_

\_Yours in writing,\_

\_theotherpianist\_

## 5. Chapter 5

\_Hello, \_\_\*\*theotherpianist \*\*\_\_back again. This chapter was originally to be apart\_\_ of chapter four but I thought it had enough material to be considered its own. Onto reviews and questions asked. Thanks to those that PM'd me congrats for breaking 20,000 words.\_

\_\*\*Mandalore the freedom:\*\*\_\_ I really haven't considered whether I'll explore the Mandalorian society and culture. Its still up for consideration.\_

\_\*\*ww1990ww:\*\*\_\_ It would be interesting. I'll keep that in consideration. I think I'll explore natural tensions in between the two in future chapters.\_

\_\*\*gwb99:\*\*\_\_ yup, it was pretty awesome. I had to make it somewhat damaged in the end. Otherwise it would have been pointless to write this part. \_

\_\*\*And to all\*\*\_\_ asking for updates I have to do it on my own time. I like frequent updates but that doesn't guarantee anything.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter Five:<p>

\*\*UNSC Dauntless: 5:30 hours\*\*

\*\*Around orbit of Planet Rhen Var, \*\*

\*\*Tobali System, Outer Rim Territories, Andromeda Galaxy\*\*

Ahsoka was surprised to say the least. The Dauntless, while not as elegant as the crashed ship on the ice, was very spacious and roomy inside and possessed a certain elegance of its own kind on the inside. She was also taken aback that this Spartan guy-whatever he was-looked human. She almost expected him to be somewhat alien underneath all that armor. When the transport had taken them back aboard he had removed his helmet and donned a temporary captain's

insignia and placed on his armor. Ahsoka didn't know what to think as she walked down a long hallway.

Anakin was conversing with Senator Amidala who had just arrived from out of system with a Holo-net crewed had been welcomed aboard but the news crews were shooed away. Aboard the massive vessel as they passed many soldiers gave funny looks as they ran to their various destinations. Obi-Wan walked behind and noted everything with particular interest.

William led the group into a conference room. He gestured to the two soldiers flanking the door. They parted and let them pass. A large number of individuals already sat in the room. A quick feel into the force told Ahsoka they were a collection of scientists, officers, and other individuals.

"Gentlemen, welcome aboard the Dauntless." William said as they all sat down. A plate of berries and assorted fruits sat before them. He chose an apple and leaned back in his chair taking a bite. "Please I insist you have one. They're native to our central planet and quite delicious."

He watched as Obi-Wan grabbed an apple from the bowl and took a bite. He nodded at the taste of it and sat back. Shipmaster 'Valam who was by default the highest ranking person in the room besides Admiral Del Rio watched with cold interest.

"Now, it is my pleasure to introduce our rescuers." William said gesturing to Anakin, Obi-Wan, Ahsoka, and Padme. "These three," he said pointing to the assembled Jedi, "Are Jedi of the Galactic Republic, the Government power that resides in the Andromeda Galaxy. The Jedi from what I was able to learn in five minutes are an Order of Warriors that serve as a Peacekeeping force throughout the galaxy.

"And this," he said pointing to the woman sitting down, "Is Padme Amidala. She's a Senator in the Legislative Body of the Galactic Republic. Being a diplomat, I thought it would be best if she were to speak a little bit about the history of this Galaxy and answer any questions you all had.

"Excuse me for a moment." Del Rio said. "Would you mind telling why we were attacked by thisâ€|Confederacy? Why are you at war? Furthermore, I would like to know why over eight thousand soldiers and sailors perished including many prominent leaders! When I'm asked how I managed to crash a Carrier and sustain enormous casualties on the ground and enormous damage to my ship I would like an answer!"

"Calm yourself Admiral." Growled Shipmaster 'Valam. I'm sure Senator Amidala will enlighten you.

"Thank you." The Senator said. "To properly answer your questions I need to start at the beginning with the birth of the Republic. I can assure Admiral that we are all as concerned and angry as you are. You have every right. You were suddenly attacked when you ended up here somehow; you have lost many good men and women. Please hold off on your aggressions.

And so Padme began. She started with the beginnings of the Republic

and the history of its government, the Wars, the heroes, and the rise of the Sith, at this point the three Jedi got up and spoke about the Force, the Jedi Order and the Sith Empire and then for a long time on the nature of the Force. As he spoke Will noticed the Shipmaster slightly on edge. The Jedi sat down and the Senator took the floor again.

"This whole war we've been involved in was started when the Trade Federation became unhappy with the Planet Naboo over trade affairs. The whole incident which we believe was instigated by a Sith Master blew up when the Trade Federation with their own security forces blockaded the Planet. Eventually we with the local natives drove off the droid forces. However with our journey to the Capitol Planet of Corruscant it revealed how corrupt the Legislative System had become." She paused and surveyed the room.

"From this talk of dissent and rebellion arose, until finally Several Corporate Groups and Planets seceded from the Republic and became the Confederacy of Independent Systems." It was discovered they were building an army for war on Geonosis. Quickly an Army built by the Cloners on Kamino was assembled and war erupted in our first major battle. From that point each side has been locked in a bloody stalemate and we have still much to go. The Confederacy's leadership is headed by a Sith Lord named Count Dooku, originally a Jedi he fell away and became lost to the dark side. Much of the Atrocities committed in this war have come because of him and the others leadership."

"However." Said Ob-Wan. "We have a reason to suspect another individual named Darth Sidious is at the head of this. We're focusing all our efforts we can to capture him but he has so far eluded capture."

He was about to continue when a young Marine ran into the room.

"Sirs! he said breathlessly. Incoming transmission from the rest of the fleet. We've just reported to them what happened. They're asking that we traverse back through to Palio Station. We need to leave ASAP for an Emergency Meeting of the Allied Species Counsel so they can discuss what happened." he said catching his breath.

"Senator, I think it's best if we adjourned for now." said Moram 'Valam. We need to undergo Emergency jump protocol." said 'Valam clarifying again.

"Ahh yes, Please allow us to contact our superiors to confer on what we must do next." Obi-Wan said.

"You three might want to come with us." he said facing the three Jedi and the Senator.

"Attention, all hands prepare for slipspace jump in ten minutes." Sarah's voice echoed over the intercom.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Allied Species Convocation Center<strong>

\*\*Orbital Station 09-01\*\*

**\*\*Palio Major Cluster, 10:36 hours UNSC Standard Time\*\***

It turned out the Slipspace drive of the Dauntless had been severely damaged to the point of needing serious repair from all the rapid jumps. Nobody had also dared to go through the slipspace portal again until they had fully studied it so Shipmaster 'Katar and William had made the decision to take the long route, a one and a half weeks journey were they steadily found their way to the nearest charted star they knew and then transitioned to Slipspace. A long and complex journey by any standard.

Kenobi had reported to William that they needed sufficient time to map out the Milky Way if they were to use Hyperdrives on board their ships, otherwise they would have the risk of blowing themselves to the far corners of the Universe. So William had given them space aboard the Dauntless for the time on the ship. Moram's ship was equipped with a prototype slipspace drive that allowed for crippled vessels like the Dauntless to follow in its slow wake. The Dauntless had followed in the wake provided by the Battlecruiser but progress had still been slow.

The survivors of the Salvation were still being treated for PTSD and other illnesses brought on by the tragedy of a Ship crashing and were told to remain onboard the Salvation for a time. Will had been declared healthy but hadn't been able to shake something from his mind.

He was very sure despite what the medical professionals thought that something had very much changed inside him.

As the two ships exited Slipspace they were met by a huge gathering of vessels both small and large. Several that were identified as news vessels tried to board the two ships but were denied.

"You've drawn quite a crowd." said Ripa wryly as they all stood on the bridge.

"Indeed we have." Obi-Wan said standing next to him his arm's crossed.

Their main focus was on a massive structure in space, the Allied Species Convocation Center. The rest of the fleet they had been separated from as well as a hundred plus other vessels were orbiting around it.

They had docked both ships at the Dockyard orbiting the Main mining facilities instead for resupply and repair as both had suffered damage to some extent.

As the Pelican dropship entered the main hangar of the Center William could hear the dull roar of reporters and camera crews. Mingled among were the indistinct voices of other soldiers or just curious civilians.

William put his helmet on and prepared for the worst. As the bay door opened the group walked into the throng.

Almost instantly a massive roar from soldiers, civilians, and other people filled the hangar.

"Move quickly." William said to the group.

Ahsoka felt hot as she walked through the mass of people. Security forces were stepping in pushing the people back. She was half blinded by the amount of cameras being pointed at the three Jedi, Senator Amidala, Shipmaster 'Katar, Ripa, and William. She tried to ignore some of the whistles some of the crowd gave her but she nevertheless got slightly red.

Shipmaster 'Valam led the group through the doors to the main hallways and turned left heading down a hallway that slightly curved off to the left. There were more cameras rolling and snapping pictures wherever they turned.

\_"Next time,"\_ William said over a private channel to the Shipmaster, \_"I think we should use the back entrance."\_ \_

\_"Agreed Demon."\_ He replied with his cold tone.

They came to an atrium of sorts with Security personal standing everywhere in lines holding the crowd back. Cheers and more erupted as they came into this room. A pair of Honor Guard Sangheili opened the two massive doors leading into the conference hall and they entered.

This time the room was silent save it for hushed whispering as the group filed in to where they would be sitting.

"Hey, can you tell me what's going to happen?" Ahsoka asked.

Will nodded and turned to face her.

"Okay, so when this meeting first begins the counselors of every member species will take the stand in front of us." He said gesturing to the rows of seats in front of him on the opposited side of the hall.

"After they officially start they will read out the purpose of this meeting. Since this is a meeting where testimony is asked to be given they will probably call me up with Ripa and then Shipmaster 'Valam to give his account. Following that they will probably ask each one of you to stand and give your testimony of what happened, you may be asked to give questions or background on the Republic but that will be all. Suggestions and proposals will be heard following that and the Council will vote on a course of action. As the group entered the courtroom, they took up seats halfway between the top and the bottom,

"So how do they go about voting?" asked Senator Amidala.

"Well," said William, "First of all the council will have to listen to all of the information that everyone has to present and then they'll vote on what to do with it. Each race has five representatives on the council, except the Mgalekgolo or Hunters who have ten and the Huragok who have none."

Ahsoka frowned "Why's that?"

"When a Lekgolo colony develops to a certain mass, it divides just

like a cell would. The two colonies share a bond you and I can only imagine, and are never found far from each other. Each pair of "Bond Brothers" is considered one vote on the council. As for the Huragok they just floated around not doing anything, so eventually they gave up on that. With seven species on the council with 5 councilors for each race, there are 45 councilors and therefore 45 votes. A majority vote is needed for the council to pass anything, a declaration of war for example or restrictions on how many of the Huragok are allowed a species."

"So these councilors control the entire Allies Species?" asked PadmÃ© entering the conversation again.

"No." said William.

"The Council lacks the power it has to control the individual species. They are merely an overarching government that is in place to ensure another war between all of us doesn't take place again. In fact we still are very much separate and don't have contact with the others." said Ripa.

"They are arriving," said Moram in that cold level voice of his, staring intently at the center of the dais. The councilors were entering from both sides and ascending the stairs that lead to the elevated platforms, every one flanked by two troopers of the same species. It was a solemn procession. As they all sat one individual, whom Ripa pointed out to the other's as Arbiter Thel' Vadam.

The room, which had been filled with quiet whispers, fell silent as the Arbiter in his runnic armor cleared his throat. He tested the microphone gently and satisfied drew himself to full height.

"This meeting of the Allied Species Council has been called due to the attack on the CAS Assault Carrier \_Salvation that\_ took place a week and a half ago and resulted in the death of its Shipmaster and nearly everyone stationed onboard. Under normal circumstances the Fleetmaster or Shipmaster would recount the events that occurred that day, but due to the fact that he and others in his leadership position are deceased that is impossible. However Spartan 317 and Special Operations Sangheili Ripa 'Talam have volunteered to recount the events that occurred that day, if they would please make their way forward?"

Ripa and William rose from their seats and walked to the speaker's podium facing them; the council faced them on all sides.

"Spartan William," said a female Human councilor "Our records show that you were part of a deadly attack on a planet when you were young. Your parents were declared missing but you decided to join the Spartan III program as a result. You have served for many years as leader of Special Warfare Team Castle, a part of ONI Section Three taking part in many operations in the Great War and later afterwards in diffusing several terrorist situations proving your ability as a leader and a clear thinker. Is this true?"

"It is councilor," said William beneath his helmet. "But I only successfully diffused those terrorist situations because my brother in arms, Ripa 'Talam was watching my back." His comment earned several grunts of approval from the Sangheili councilors who nodded their heads in satisfaction. His words had their attention. The story



of what had happened was still a major talking point among the Sangheili.

"Yes we are aware of the fact that you are deemed an honorary member of the 'Talam family," said the female councilor. "And you Ripa, you were the one who granted him this title correct?"

"Only because he showed an amount of honor and bravery that would put half of my race to shame, risking his life to save the life of three dozen civilians with no support but myself and an AI. Merits that show him as a true warrior." said Ripa, the faintest hint of pride in his voice. This was the only way I could repay such a feat to such a great warrior.

"Very well," said another councilor "Can you recount the events of the attack to us?"

William and Ripa recounted the events that they had experienced on Rhen Var. Their ship had been caught with its shields down after traversing the portal; the Confederacy had landed and swarmed them, pressing in on them relentlessly, how there had seemed to be no end to the swarm of droids who seemed to have no other purpose in life than killing them. They then proceeded to inform the council of the arrival of the Republic and the military assistance that they had provided which eventually broke the siege.

"If they had not arrived then when the \_Twilight Transcendence \_had arrived, there would have been no survivors of this abominable attack. I owe them my life." Ripa said humbly.

"Very well," said the same councilor that had asked them about questions "You my retake your seats." William and Ripa nodded and reasoned the steps to where the others sat.

"Um," said Ahsoka, still feeling slightly embarrassed at the attention the Sangheili had given her. "You were fighting terrorists and saving civilians?"

"Xenophobes," said William "People who don't like the idea of working with aliens and decide that blowing things up is the best way to fix it. Half a dozen of them had a bunch of civilians wired with explosives and were threatening to blow them sky high. I had to draw their attention via sniper fire, while Ripa snuck up on them andâ€¦"

"Moram 'Katar, please make your way forward at this time please." The same councilor asked.

Moram rose and descended the stairs coming up to the same podium.

"Shipmaster," said Rtas 'Vadum. "Would you please add your account to what has been spoken please?"

The Shipmaster looked around, cleared his throat and began.

"After the Dauntless and the Salvation were seized by the slipspace portal the rest of the fleet panicked and made a wide perimeter around the portal preventing anyone else from being sucked in. We were going to call the crews dead when the message that they were

being attacked came through the actual portal a few seconds before our main comms registered the actual message. I elected to take my ship through to see what was going on. I entered the system with relatively few issues and saw the Confederacy chasing the Dauntless in the planet's orbit and the Republic's fleet taking on the remnant of their original fleet.

I quickly contacted Captain Del Rio and together we took down many ships but we were being slowly beaten, the Dauntless and my ship were taking a serious beating. We couldn't scramble enough men to help the survivors below and we thought we would have to shamefully retreat until the Galactic Republic stepped in and prevented the Separatist's from leaving the planet. We sent an Intelligence team to bring back a prisoner and then blew up the last ship."

He said this last part finishing with a hint of satisfaction.

"Thank you Shipmaster." said a Kig-yar councilor.

"Admiral Andrew Del Rio, would you please step forward and testify?" asked the same female councilor again.

William watched as Del Rio rose from the left, and made his way forward to the front of the chamber where he stood before the Councilors. He looked very sure of himself and proud. An uneasy feeling began to creep down his back.

"Admiral, please give us your account." She said.

"Certainly. At 22:00 hours the Dauntless and Carrier Salvation were suddenly snatched from this galaxy as we powered up our Slip-space drives. The portal had a negative reaction to that and we were sucked into the Andromeda Galaxy in a region known by the natives as the Outer Rim, a generally lawless place. We were soon attacked after arrival by the Confederacy with overwhelming numbers. After the Carrier was shot down I elected to use a variation of the Hat-Yai weave tactic to deal damage to the enemy fleet while still maintaining the element of mobility and being on the run. Eventually after massed damage to both sides the Republic and Shipmaster 'Valam arrived and drove off the fleet."

"Is that all?" asked the Arbiter

"Yes Arbiter."

"You may be seated."

"Would the representatives from the Galactic republic make their way to the front?" he asked..

As the Jedi and PadmÃ© made their way to the front. They did not receive the same silence that William and Ripa had received, as several mutters emitted from the crowd among which were "They're human," and "What warrior wears cloth to a battle?" The crowd seemed equally confused.

As the representatives reached the center Rtas read off of a holo-pad a brief transcript of the meeting on the Dauntless. "

Is our data accurate?" The four nodded. "Our information on this

Galactic Republic is painfully limited, mainly confined to the data that was acquired by Sierra-271 and what you told the Leadership aboard the Dauntless. We were hoping that you could fill in the gaps in the data. We would also appreciate it if you could provide us with additional information on this Confederacy of Independent Systems."

The next hour was completely dedicated to the Jedi and PadmÃ© informing the council about the Republic and the Confederacy. Mainly their atrocities committed on other planets. "Thank you that will be all," said one of the Human councilors as the Republic representatives returned to their seats.

"Requesting permission to address the council," said Moram from his seat.

"Permission granted," said the Arbiter.

Moram descended the stairs to the center of the room where the council looked down upon him with curiosity. "I request that should a declaration of war be declared on the Confederacy of Independent Systems, that the use of energy projectors be authorized yet restricted." Murmurings ran throughout the crowd as Moram continued,

"From what we have learned, the military force of the Confederacy is almost entirely comprised of droids, most of which possess artificial intelligence inferior to that of a dumb A.I. Energy projectors used on military targets only would serve their effect. We need not glass an entire planet. It would greatly impede the ability of the Confederacy to make war as well as prevent the unnecessary deaths of countless troops."

The murmurings continued for a few seconds, before Rtas leaned forward slightly and said "We shall put it to a vote should war be declared Shipmaster."

"Thank you councilor, I have one more thing to say," said Moram as he returned to his seat. "Arbiter," he said directing his comments to the Elite in Gray runic armor.

"Yes Shipmaster?"

"Would you like to question the prisoner?" he said.

The silence shattered as the Council realized the magnitude of what they had been offered.

"There will be ORDER!" roared the Arbiter.

The roars and yells stopped slowly as they realized what had been said. Cameras from the news crews started rolling.

"Bring forth the prisoner." He said coldly.

The lights dimmed leaving only a circle of light on the floor where Tar Muuk would stand.

Moram gestured to two Elite Guards at the left side and they opened up the door. Two Zealots in blood red armor stepped forth bringing

out a wriggling captain flailing about. He stared petrified at the various groups watching to see if anybody would make a move.

The council gasped and started muttering and whispering furiously to each other.

"Arbiter," said Moram taking a spot on the floor next to him, "May I introduce to you Captain Tar Muuk, head of the fleet which shamefully spilt innocent blood." He spoke the last words with a bitter contempt.

A general roar of outrage burst from the assembled crowd. William silently sat observing the events with a passive eye.

"Admiral, would you like to defend yourself and your actions before this counsel?" asked one of the Unggoy Counselors.

"Y...Y...Yes." he stammered out terrified.

"Then do so." growled one of the Brutes angrily.

"Wâ€|Wâ€|Well, I was tasked by my leaders to go to the Tobali System and explore sites for a Listening post and to set up bases of operation. Previously the scandalous Republic had attacked a Base we had established on there. In the end it was left abandoned by all until one of our Fleets went missing. I was then asked to go and set up a base of operations. When the ships appeared, I and my commanding General didn't know what to think, so when we intercepted a transmission from my superiors about a fleet of Republic ships I assumed they were hostiles."

"But none of our ships are of Galactic Design! Surely you would offâ€|" roared Admiral Del Rio from his seat.

"I gave you a warning shot!" yelled Tar Muk facing Del Rio.

"You gave us 90 seconds before you proceeded to kill over \_eight thousand\_ soldiers and sailors. \_Innocent\_ victims!"

Most of the counsel and audience spectating rose to its feet and began arguing and shouting at everyone else."

"There will be ORDER!" Roared the Arbiter.

"An instant hush fell over the crowd."

"Admiral. I can sympathize but I cannot agree that your actions were condonable in any scenario. You will have the pleasure to note your name will go down in history as one of those the ignited the war machine that we possess." The Arbiter glared descending the stairs and staring him in the eye.

Admiral Mur trembled as this monster stared him down, a furious beast from \*\*\*\*.

"If there is nothing else to be presented," said 'Vadam turning to the councilors, "I propose that a declaration of war be issued against the Confederacy of Independent Systems. All those in favor,"

The hand of every last councilor raised itself, almost immediately.

"Very well," said Thel "And all of those in favor of Shipmaster 'Valam's proposal on the use of energy projectors for usage in glassing military targets only."

All five Sangheili councilors raised their hands, as did all of the Jiralhanae, four of the Kig-yars three of the Humans, two of the Unggoy, one of the Yanme'e, four of the Magegleko.

"Very well," said the Arbiter "From this day forth the Allied Species is at war with the Confederacy of Independent Systems, and as an extension the Galactic Republic is our ally. Energy projectors will be used on military targets only, no civilians are to be harmed by us, agreed?" all of the councilors nodded.

"Get the prisoner to a facility where he can be monitored." He said gesturing at Sal Mur

"We must return to our homes to mobilize our forces," said Thel "Go now all of you, and may your warrior spirits guide you to victory."

The lights returned and William ushered the extra-galactic visitors out through masses of staring people back onto the Dauntless.

\* \* \*

><p><em>And the wheels of war begin to turn.<br>\_

\_Yours in writing.\_

\_theotherpianist.\_

## 6. Chapter 6

\_Hello all! I am back from a much needed vacation and I was flooded with reviews upon logging on again. My apologies for this chapter taking a while. Special thanks to **\*\*creamofwheat2311\*\*** and **\*\*My-Wunderwaffle-iz-missin\*\*** for allowing usage of passage and help with descriptions of the 'Talam family estate. All his material is his but characters created by me are my own. Many thanks to the reviews and readers! Let's get started with a few!\_

**\*\*\_noblenoisii, wellhaithar: \_\*\*\_Thanks for your input\_ \_and reading :)\_**\_

**\*\*Themwafflez: \*\***well, I kinda need to finish this book before I tell you more. Yes, Del Rio is a pretty big antagonist he really just makes me mad. He may have been justified but still...

**\*\*Pocketfullofsprs:\*\***

\_Less curb stomping granted\_

**\*\*\_Guest:\_\*\*\_**All right Holy cow. Chill. This will try to stick to cannon. More to Star Wars than Halo but it will eventually split.

>Uhmhhh.<em>

\_I think I will try to incorporate some of the Clone War's plots. Like Darth Maul coming back, etc. As for Pre Vizla? Yes. \*\*Mandalorian's will make appearance\*\* more details to come in future.\_

\_I really am going to explore tensions between the two sides. This is a fantastic thing to explore. Your comment about 'Nam? Uhh... okay. I get where you're going at. Freelancers? Hmm. Haven't thought about that one. Thanks for the suggestions. My explanation for the force will come next chapter, the UNSC did it once before, it will have to figure out how to do it again.\_

\*\*\_TIMELINE UNDER CONSTRUCTION\_\*\*

\_And without further ado, \_

Chapter Six

\*\*Slipspace:\*\*

\*\*UNSC Marathon Class Cruiser: Morning Light, en route to Sangheili planet Sangheilios:\*\*

\*\*22:00 hours \*\*

"Why am I surprised we're in another war." said William as he Ripa walked through the stark gray corridors of the \_Morning Light\_. "If you consider the fact we're already in the middle of a conflict with Storm and Promethean forces that is."

"I feel honored, actually, to be able to take part in this conflict against this Separatist faction that has committed crimes against Humanity and other species almost as heinous as what my race did to yours a few years ago. By fighting we will end the existence and rule of a tyrant. What's wrong about-" He stopped and turned towards him. "Why are you so distracted?"

William frowned. "There's something about this ship, the \_Morning Light, \_I know I've done something with it before-". He stopped.

Standing on the other side was an ODST with his helmet on his back magnetic plate next to a shotgun. His hair was a lighter shade of brown than Will's.

"Oh-family." Was all he said as William and Ripa came into sight. He snapped to a salute at the sight of the two warriors.

"At ease Corporal." He said as the ODST caught sight and saluted. William looked the ODST up and down.

"Well it was nice of you the two of you to show up." The ODST finished saluting and then proceeded to shake hands William.

"How are you doing Corporal Gunther?" he asked simply.

"I'm good Spartan, Angel is stationed on board right now, and we're

to be deployed with the rest of the fleet once it is gathered. How long has it been since we last met?"

"Too long." Was all he said beneath the helmet.

"I really would like to thank you with my squad as well for helping us transfer to a more action-oriented role instead of guard duty at a prison. Although frankly given recent events I'm liking the peaceful option." Turning to Ripa he cocked his head to one side almost jokingly and said, "You and Ripa must be quite glad to be off that planet huh."

Ripa gave a quiet snarl in response and glowered.

"No," said Ripa looking down at the ODST. "It was something I would never wish another to experience. That was a slaughter of terrible proportions. Those abominations were almost the death of the two of us."

The ODST immediately sobered up.

"I'm sorry." He said.

"It's fine Corporal. It made for one heck of a tale though." William said trying to forget what happened on Rhen Var.

"Where are the Jedi right now?" he asked.

"Last I heard they were in the dueling arena." Ripa answered after a second of thought.

"What were they doing?"

"Probably using those swords that they all possess." said Will.

"Here's what's getting me, the Jedi named Ahsoka, she showed me some of the telekinetic powers that they all, the Jedi, possess. If you think about the other implications and things they could do with it, a Mal-practitioner or 'Sith' could easily wipe out a platoon without much effort. We don't know how to fight it either. This almost seems unfair that Andromedians have this advantage."

Still. "It's kind of cool if you think about it." said Alex.

"Cool or not it needs to be considered." replied Ripa.

"I'm heading to the arena Ripa, Corporal. You can join if you want." Will said turning away.

He turned and walked away. Ripa joined him from behind.

Corporal Gunther uttered a word of good-bye and left.

As soon as they were out of earshot Ripa suddenly faced him.

"Why don't you tell your brother who you are?!" questioned the Elite almost angrily.

Will stopped and sighed.

"Are we \_really\_ going to cover this again?" he asked.

Ripa's expression gave him that answer.

"Fine then." He paused and then continued

"After we were separated on a colonized world that was suddenly attacked by the Covenant the spooks at ONI told me my family was dead when everybody had evacuated. At this point I realize it was probably a lie to get me into the program but it worked,"

"I found out much later after I ran into Corporal Gunther in the fall of Reach that he and my other brother promised to each other after that day that so long as I was declared MIA from the roster of those civilians that were missing parents and family they wouldn't stop protecting the Earth and her colonies from threats like the Covenant. The armed services made them much better people than they were before. My going missing was a good thing. I don't know how serious the repercussions would be among my family if I were suddenly revealed to be alive. If they knew the person I have been molded by the war to be I'm not sure they would accept me anymore. How could they accept the entire list of things I have had to do?"

He phrased that question as an angry retort to Ripa.

"There are way too many things that I've done that could easily turn my family against me, shatter that image they all had! And what then?"

The Elite crossed his arm and stared at the Spartan.

"But much could've changed other than that over time or they could accept you at face-value. I have no clue as well Demon." replied Ripa.

Will sighed and turning to face him again and stopped.

"I'm sorry brother. I wish you could face up to that fear honorably." said Ripa evenly dropping the subject. It wasn't an angry or offensive statement, just one of neutrality and apology.

The two walked into the training arena where Anakin and Obi-Wan were sparring with each other.

Chelsea was watching with a eagle eye. She greeted the Spartan and continued watching.

"Hey," said Ahsoka seeing them and walking over to her.

Chelsea gave a wave.

"Soooâ€¦what's going on now. All I know is that I've been ordered aboard this vessel for something I don't know about and I don't have a clue as to where we are headed. Do you know anything?"

"Hello," said Corporal Gunther as the two looked up and saw him approached the two talking woman. Interrupting the conversation. "I'm sorry, who are you?" asked Ahsoka curiously.

"Corporal Alex Gunther," 355th Droop Platoon of the 19th, Angel Squad. I see you've met Spartan William here.



"Yeah..." said Ahsoka as she rubbed the back of her neck while talking to the young ODST. "He's uhh...an amazing soldier." She said finally not knowing what to say.

An awkward silence passed and Will shared a private smile with Chelsea with a subtle hand gesture.

"Well," said Chelsea getting to her feet breaking an awkward silence, "It's been nice talking to you all but a really need to get into my armor. We'll be arriving soon. The council has ordered the Allied Species to converge at Sangheilios with the Republic fleet to join up. See you later," said Chelsea as she walked out of the room.

William and Ripa left for another room to leave the ODST and the Padawan in an awkward situation and stopped.

"Demon." said Ripa in his native Sangheili tongue. "This is the last I will say on the subject for now on the subject of your brother. You my brother are a skilled combatant, a terrific and terrifying warrior for any enemy to face, a bringer of Justice to the oppressed and most importantly to me, my friend. You have seen the worst our races have to offer and beaten that off. Yetâ€|you can't bring upon yourself to confront your own issues and solve them? My goal is not to inflame you. Justâ€| to make you see. You can't hide forever. Sooner or later those Ghosts will haunt you. It's better that you just get it over with, how and why is up to you. That is all I wish to say. Do youâ€|understand?"

"Iâ€|do." Said William staring the Sangheili evenly down.

"I'm glad to hear it, I only wish to help. That is all. I will leave the subject alone. In the meantime we should be approaching when of the 'Talam family's establishments, no?"

"I take it I'm a guest of honor?" Will asked.

"No. You are my brother. You are much more than a guest." He pointed to the emblem on both the shoulder plates for the Spartan and himself. You are a 'Talam, however you were born and raised, I would like you to extend the invitation to Chelsea and the Jedi. Andâ€|if you're brave enough, your brother." They all deserve the hospitality of the 'Talam family."

"Are you excited to come home?"

"Excited is more of a human term. The phrase I would use would be at peace."

Will nodded.

"Thanks." He said after a long silence.

"Hmm?"

"For talking I guess you're the only individual besides...\_her\_... that I've told that to.

"You miss her terribly." it was a statement, not a question.

"She's alive. I know it. Her, the rest of the team, they're out there. Somewhere." he shook his head.

Ripa offered a hand on his shoulder.

"I'll go see if anybody is interested." William said leaving in search of the others.

\* \* \*

><p>The bay of the Phantom Dropship was quiet as it descended to its destination of the 'Talam "vacation" estate. Their main seat of power on Eudemon instead. It was one of the family's smaller establishments. Will saw from the windows the familiar shape of the Keep. A mid-size complex that was situated in the shadow of a large mountain surrounded by trees and snow. A river ran by and through the middle of it winding towards a series of falls. The Keep was built around and into the mountain hugging and burrowing into the craggy cliffs. It was easily defendable from any sort of attack. As the Pelican descended a flight of Banshee's soared up to meet them and escorted them into one of the Estate's large hangars.<p>

No matter how many times I come here," said Will "I can't get over how breathtaking your home is." as the Phantom docked and the ground crew prepped it for another trip back to the fleet in orbit. The two exited first. The Jedi exited next, headed up by Chelsea in the rear.

The Ship had arrived in orbit around Sangheilios minutes ago. Despite this, only half of the fleet had yet to arrive, the rest due to arrive in a day's time. During this waiting period William had extended Ripa's invitation to the others to stay the night in the 'Talam estate.

"This is amazing!" exclaimed Ahsoka as she took in all the sights as the group left the hangar.

The group came up to a duo of Guards wearing a new variation of armor deemed the Peacekeeper variant.

"Greetings Ripa, William, and to all of you honored guests." The Sangheili said with a bow.

"To you as well. Is the Kaidon here?" asked Ripa?

"He has been expecting you. If you will all follow me to the banquet hall." The Elite gestured with a large hand and the entered through a large door to a long corridor stretching its way throughout the complex.

They passed through another doorway and suddenly they were on an elevated walkway A waterfall roared down on their right side and the land stretched out to their left. Plasma lighted lamps lit their way as they descended into the mountain again.

They turned left at a junction and pushed their way through two tall, majestic double doors emblazoned with the 'Talam crest.

After a pause they entered.

Seated before the group was a large table set for a feast with a great many Sangheili crowded around in chairs conversing.

They fell silent as they saw the approaching group.

"Kaidon 'Talam. Announcing the arrival of Ripa 'Talam and blood brother William with honorary guests."

A large Elite wearing an ornate set of armor reserved for the office of Kaidon rose from his seat at the middle of the table and approached.

"By the Forerunners! It is you! Welcome brother Ripa!" he exclaimed as the two embraced in the human equivalent of a hug.

"It is good to be home at least Kaidon." said Ripa as they pulled apart.

"And you Blood Brother! Welcome!" said the Kaidon. The two of them shook hands and William made a customary bow.

"I'm honored to be here." said William.

"As well you should, my servants have been preparing a feast worthy of the gods for your arrival. Come all of you! Sit and rest! You've all had a long journey." He gestured to Ripa, "It is a shame, and you just missed your brother Vaal."

"He was here?" asked Ripa curiously "It has been sometime since we have met last."

"Vaal was here on some business with the Demon they call Aegis. Their ship left atmosphere moments before you arrived."

"Very well. I will have to try to meet with him at a later date."

"Vaal is still with the Blades right?" asked William.

"He is. In fact the Blades were just here on the planet gathering information for a mission. You were invited to join no by one of the members?" he asked William.

"Yes, but I don't work in the dark like some Spartans do. However legitimate Aegis and the Blades are I don't see working as a Mercenary as a, if I may, honorable thing to do, even if their employer is the UNSC or ONI. Besides, I had a team of my own. I was perfectly content where I was before all but Chelsea and I disappeared.

The Kaidon nodded ending discussion he gestured to a group of seats and they all sat.

"And you, must be our honored guests." He said pointing a hand at the Jedi. "Welcome to 'Talam Keep. I am Kaidon Akuo 'Talam, head of the 'Talam Family and clan."

"Thank you Kaidon for extending us your hospitality." Obi-Wan responded. "We have a come a long way from our galaxy and we are

grateful for your acceptance of us here."

"You are most welcome. I have heard a great deal about the events that have occurred recently. I trust you would be able to enlighten me on the subject?"

"We certainly can." Said Obi-Wan.

"In the meantime sit! We have much to discuss about but first let us eat. And then we may talk like civilized individuals.

An hour or two later after they had all eaten an enormous meal fit for an emperor they had all gotten up to have a guided tour of the Keep by Ripa. The Kaidon was due for a meeting where he was to discuss the War Effort supplied by the 'Talam family.

They were nearly done when the group arrived at another room with a pair of Guards standing watch.

"Whoa," exclaimed Ahsoka in awe as they entered it room and stopped.

"Ah yes," said Ripa stepping into the same room with everybody else. "This is the meditation room and my favorite place. What you see here is the original copy of our family's battle poem. The group had entered in a massive room. On the wall directly in front of them, elegant carvings had been etched in stone, depicting the story of the family from its beginning. Pictured were scenes of great battle, of its rise and gradual decline. It spoke of a hope for the future and for the family to become great again. Placed around the room where several chairs where a couple Sangheili were meditating with eyes closed.

"The last portion, it isn't new correct?" asked Anakin gesturing to some carvings near the bottom.

"That is correct. It is also my personal favorite part."

"Why would that be?" asked Obi-Wan intrigued.

"Because this part is about William and myself." The Sangheili said with a grin.

"That's amazing!" Ahsoka said examining it.

"Please do tell us." Said Obi-Wan.

"Fair enough, it begins like this." He walked over and pointed to what looked like a city.

"Some time ago fairly recently there was an incident on the Human Colony of Mamore that threatened war between the two races of Human and Sangheili. Several Xenophobic Terrorist groups in order to send a message kidnapped the Sangheili ambassador to that planet and held him, and several dozen civilians and Police members hostage in the middle of an underground road tunnel." Being relatively new in my career as a Special Operations soldier I thought the job would be easy."

He turned to the rest of the group.

"I was put with a team the Humans had come up with. I met William for the first time there. However I was arrogant and proud. Demon or not I was sure he was inferior. It was during this time that during this I was saved twice by him. An eye-opener for a Sangheili like me." When our plan went South he and I came up with an idea that saved the Ambassador and all other hostages. To thank him my family decided to official make him a member of the 'Talam family. It was the first time it had been done in history. While we drew ire and resentment we also drew praise. It is this moment where both species cooperated so in sync that earned its place on our wall."

Will coughed. "I wouldn't say I was great, you saved me three times in turn that day. You must give yourself some credit.

"Another day." Ripa said. "It is time that I show you your last stop. Your rooms for the night are this way."

He led the way out and the group followed.

Chelsea glanced at Anakin and saw that he was lagging behind her and Ahsoka as she turned to face her. "So you and Alex seemed to get along pretty well," she said.

"Um," said Ahsoka "Yeah I guess we did."

Ahsoka turned back to her.

"Yes?" Chelsea asked as the Female Jedi tried to formulate what to say.

"My apologies, but would you mind telling me the story of how you and William met?" she asked somewhat timidly.

The Spartan waited a moment before answering,

"I suppose I've pushed that off long enough, all right, I'll begin. Now, to understand that you need to know who Asher was."

"Who-"

"Just wait!" she laughed. "Okay, William lived and grew up on our home planet of Earth. When he was young he met Asher, a girl who lived next door to him. The two developed a friendship of sorts. They both applied to a local arts school later in their teenage years and became closer friends. One night after a series of events William took Asher and a few friends to the theater where they watched the program until it was interrupted by one of their classmates who in a fit of fury and rage shot many dead and critically wounded William and Asher. But not before William rose up and fought him." Ahsoka gasped and cupped her hands to her mouth, horrified.

"They grappled on a balcony and William accidentally knocked him off the balcony. He and Asher were both taken to a medical center where they both recovered. We have no idea where the classmate went after prison. We have never found anything. All we know is he is alive in some cell somewhere. They started a charity concert tour to benefit people who have lost loved ones to violence and that's were things fell apart."

"What happened?"

"You remember in your briefing about the Covenant?"

"The faction Ripa and the Shipmaster used to be a part of that declared a genocidal war on you?"

She nodded.

"They were touring when the Covenant suddenly and brutally attacked the planet they were on at the time, in the mass chaos they were separated from their families. They were picked by a couple of ONI agents who did the best thing and searched for their parents. Unable to because of a system problem it listed their families as dead. With no other course of action at that point they were conscripted into the Spartan III program where William and I first met. Asher, William and I along with a ten others became a team that was efficient and effective. We were all good by ourselves and in pairs but William and Asher were something else."

"Wow." was all Ahsoka said.

"The two were the \_go-to\_ pair. They never became romantically involved. Too much at stake, too much at risk was their logic. But whenever you needed something done they were always called up. At any rate they were split from each other. Asher went to another team, Noble, where they participated in the Fall of that Colony while our team, Castle fought on the other side of the planet. She was critically injured by Sangheili and rescued by Will who had been operating with our team elsewhere. We found her surrounded by attackers, brought her back to a base and retreated in a Prowler on the skin of our teeth."

Ahsoka nodded gesturing for her to go on.

"It was one day years later that we were fighting with a splinter group of the Covenant. Everybody save Will and I because of injury was sent down to the surface of a Planet to retrieve intelligence. They had to make a blind jump to Slipspace and as they did so they were hit by weaponry that damaged their drive. Even so they jumped and we never saw any of them again."

"Wow." Thatâ€|must be hard for him." Ahsoka said awkwardly.

"It was. He still believes they're out there. When we heard about a distress beacon he immediately thought it was their ship. He's been worried about it ever since."

"Poor guy." Ahsoka said.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Upper Atmosphere of Sangheilius. 3:00 hours UNSC STANDARD MILITARY TIME<strong>

Twilight Transcendence

Bridge:

Moram 'Katar sat in his gravity chair on the \_Twilight Transcendance\_, motionless, mediating. He was around 120 years old give or take. He had never known his official birthdate. Since Sangheili lived an average of 200 years, he was still technically youngish. He was studying a copy of the recent Intel releases. What he saw concerned him more and more. Creating the deep state of motionlessness that he was in. He was tired but he shrugged it off doggedly as he took in every word and memorized it.

A hologram appeared in front of him. It was of a Sangheili wearing gray armor with runes covering every single visible portion. "Arbiter," said Moram "To what do I owe the honor?"

\_"Moram 'Katar," \_said Thel \_"I have much to speak to you about at the present time. You still are persistent in your policies on mercy correct?\_"

"I don't show mercy to my enemies," said Moram "Mercy I grant to them is mercy I could and should be showing to my allies.

\_"I was not questioning your methods,"\_ said Thel \_"I was just making sure that you knew that the council did not completely agree with you and I had to silence a motion to remove you from your post.."\_

"I acquired enough votes for my request to be pasted, if the rest disagreed, that is their decision."

\_"Yes well,"\_ said Thel \_"I was looking over your service record and I must say it was quite extensive. You certainly have much to be proud of. Especially in your latest involvement with the Separatist fleet. \_Moram nodded.

\_"Yes,"\_ said Thel \_"It appears that you have been on the recommendation list for Fleetmaster ever since, and you have constantly strived to reach that rank in the form of excessive training and studding. The reason I contacted you was to inform you, that due to the number of Fleetmasters being less than we need to fight a war of this magnitude, you have been promoted to fleet master."\_

Moram lowered his head "I am honored Arbiter."

\_"I'm sure that you are," said Thel. "You will be given control of the Carrier Blinding Doubtâ€¦|\_"

"Thank you Arbiter," said Moram.

Thel frowned \_"Very well, just one question Moram, this is the third war that you will participate in, how do you feel about that?"\_

Moram looked at Thel as he uttered one word. "Ancient."

The Arbiter chuckled.

\_"When you get to be my age Fleetmaster you feel like you've lived a life time many times over."\_

The newly commissioned Fleetmaster stared at him for a second. Ever since he had seen him since the incident over Rhen Var he was deeply

troubled as well and was given to long periods of thought.

"Arbiter, what troubles you?" he asked finally.

The Arbiter stared back at him for a moment.

\_"Since you ask Fleetmaster I might as well divulge."\_

"Continue." Said Moram, his curiosity perked.

\_"What do you think of this so-called Force?" he said. It was neither a question nor a statement but it conveyed so much complexity that Moram was surprised with the depth of it.\_

Moram hesitated, he had been newly briefed on it but on seeing it demonstrated was left with more questions than answers.

"Honestly Arbiter, I do not know." He finally said unable to come up with an answer.

Thel chuckled again.

\_"You are much like Rtas' you know."\_

"I will take that as a compliment." He responded evenly.

It was true though, word of it had spread around like the parasite, and it had been extremely hard for Thel to get his head around the concept. That there was some all-binding, invisible energy field that gave strength and power to those who could wield it was strange. The fact that it seemed none of his race possessed it, but humanity, and a former enemy, in a separate \_galaxy\_ no less, wasâ€|concerning.

\_"What I am concerned with,"\_ the Arbiter said finally, \_"Is the matter of how to combat and fightâ€|thisâ€|Force." If what has been told and spoken of is true, what is to stop those possessing it to simply swipe away and those without it? What could our warriors do against such a power? And how, if anything, could they succeed? What also troubles me is since the Great Schism and the end of the Great War Humanity has been blessed in ways that have also troubled me."\_

"Are you referring to their advances in technology? If I may, the fleet you sentâ€|"

\_"I am not talking about the ship I sent years ago to help in reconstructing work. That was designed to enable the Humans to slowly increase their understanding of the universe. Call it if you will a gift of compassion, a trait many think I don't have. But no, what I refer to is how the Human race always something hidden, a game changer, something to make us recalculate every possible thing we have ever imagined about them.\_

\_Consider there remarkable courage and strength when facing overwhelming odds, many a Sangheili would have turned coward and disgraced themselves, during the Great War we forced to reconsider our strategy, it was too bloody, too much without honor because of this ability."\_ He paused and contemplated it a few more seconds.



\_"The Humans are always quick to adapt, quicker than I regret to say us. To use my same example after the fall of colonies Humanity rethought their defense strategy. They never had much in the way of technology but they made due and even improved greatly upon what they had and used it much to our anger. And now this, this Force has threatened to change the tables again and we do not know how it will affect their race this time. Why in that galaxy were they were cut off by the Forerunner's and saved from this galaxy's fate of starting over."\_

"Wise words Arbiter." The Fleetmaster said finally comprehending the Arbiter's thoughts on the issue. "I do not know the answers to the question you ask, but I do know this. The Sangheili are a strong race, we would not submit ourselves or bow down so easily to those possessing the Force like we did with the Prophets. We have found a way to defeat the Parasite, how worse could this threat be?"

The Arbiter nodded.

\_"You are indeed wise; the Sangheili will always be strong as we always have been, no matter what circumstances we face. I know now that I was correct in promoting you to Fleetmaster. May you honor your title and ancestors with it."\_

"My thanks Arbiter." said Moram as the Fleetmaster bowed his head.

The connection closed and the Fleetmaster sat in his chair again. Yes, this was deeply distressing, he didn't like it. The whole issue stank like a bad Doarmirian fruit that was overripe. He knew somewhere down the long line, there would be dire consequences.

He sighed and went back to reading and pondered the future.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Well there you go! Another chapter! I apologize for the long wait. This story isn't dead though! We get to see a little more back story into William and Ripa! Many thanks to My <strong>Wunderwaffle iz missin<strong> for help with writing and usage of characters. A nice filler chapter to satiate you. The Galaxy will experience the UNSC for the first and certainly brutal time.</em></p>

\_As always, yours in writing\_

\_theotherpianist\_

## 7. Chapter 7

\_Hello again! **theotherpianist** is back with another chapter. Our first taste of action in the Galaxy! Reviews were appreciated. Last chapter was really fun exploring more of Will's back story and giving much more questions than answers. We revealed Noble Six to be alive, Will has family entering the story, and the tale of Ripa and Will is explored. Not bad for a filler I think.\_

**I broke 10,000 hits** on May 31st. Thanks to all of those that have

read! This story will also break 30,000 words by the time it is done with this chapter.

>To those of you who wanted more action this chapter is for you!<p>

To answer a few reviews:

**\_Noble7:\_Jun** made it off Reach, probably by use of Prowler or something. Canonically he is alive. After all he did visit Spartan Palmer before she became a Spartan IV. Future explanations of all the minor details coming in a few chapters. Suffice it to say, she (Noble Six) made it off Reach. \_

**\_Dirtcheepcheep:\_First** of all cool name, second of all updates will try to be regular but I can never guarantee that. I hope you understand.\_

**\_Loguslol, Brutus Silentium, EarthPatriot117\*\*(?)\*\*:** **Glad** you like it.\_

**\_Guest 1: \_This "OP'ness"** people speak about is **intentional** per se for the moment**\*\*. It** may appear skewed, and for the time being it is. I can't exactly just let the cat out of the bag and tell everyone what the heck my plan is. Thanks for the wishes of best luck. \_

**\_Guest 2\_\*\*\_:** Glad you liked it, just one request. When you are reviewing please do not call the other reviewers who have donated their time to make this better any derogatory names. Please, just don't.\_

**\_Utterbotania: \_I** wasn't planning on doing any romances between an OC and Ahsoka. That's already been done. No point in doing it again.  
><em>

**\*\*\*NOTE\*\* NAMES OF BROTHERS ARE NOT OFFICIAL, THEY ARE \*\*\*\*FILLING THE SPACE FOR THE TIME BEING\*\***

\_\_And now for the feature presentation.\_\_

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter Seven:<p>

**Allied Species Fleet** orbiting Separatist Industrial Planet designated Andromeda-1,**\*\***

**UNSC Marathon Class Cruiser Morning Light**  
><strong>

**Tobali System, Outer Rim Territories, Andromeda Galaxy**  
**\*\***

**November 25\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2558: 3:00 hours\*\***

**Corporal Dean Gunther:\*\***

Corporal Dean "Deacon" Gunther was chatting among the members of his squad inside the Morning Light's Barracks.

"So what do you think the Republic's doing down on Alpha 1?" asked Private 1st Class Li Tao.

"Probably their having their butts kicked by whatever attacked the survivors of the Salvation." responded Specialist Will "Snark" Towson.

"They thing that scares me is the fact their entire army is made of clones of one bounty hunter." Responded Gunnery Sergeant Samantha (Sam) Hamilton who was looking at her data pad at some newly provided Intel on the state of the Galactic Civil War.

"No, it's the fact that the galaxy is possessed by crazy people who can do all sorts of things telepathically with their minds, from what I hear the Dark Side of the force is a pretty frightening thing." argued Lance Corporal Amanda "Magnet" Jackson.

"You guys really should be afraid of me." said Specialist Miguel "Castillo" Ramirez in his best overly fake Mexican Accent. The group assembled chuckled.

"Way to go Miguel." Corporal Clarissa Konstantinov said with a Polish blur to her voice. "It's always the Mexican that has to be the scariest thing alive."

"Really Miguel, its Sergei you need to be afraid of." Added Benjamin "Bee" Roberts pointing at massively built Russian.

"Sure, its the Russians and then the Mexicans." said Sergei Brisbois.

"Cut the chatter ladies, no offense meant to those who are." barked their Sergeant, Duncan McKenzie, a well built and powerful Scotsman, at the assembled troops who had just entered.

The group fell silent and the formed up into a line.

"All right Angel, LISTEN UP." He said emphasizing the last two words for Ramirez and Towson.

"The freaks that bothered to tango with our boys on Rhen Var have built'em selves a nice little base on the planet below. We're droppin in with a couple o' ranger units. Yer objective is to kill me some artillery and AA emplacements on thee ground that 'er poundin' allied forces. Colonel Tarkov will brief us more as we drop."

"Sounds simple enough." said Amanda

"The only problem is that we have to do it quickly and preferably quietly." answered the Sergeant in return.

"How do we do that?" asked Samantha.

"We don't, which is we why I said we need to move fast so that we're not utterly violated in a gruesome fashion. Did I mention we got o' couple platoons of killer robots facin' us?" said the Sergeant with a smile.

"You don't say." Dean said concerned.

An alarm suddenly blared in the ship.

"That's our cue! Move it Angel!" The Sergeant barked.

Alex quickly followed the squad as they followed the Sergeant to one of the hangar modified for UNSC use their pods were through it and in another room. Alex saw a group of soldiers in Jetpacks awaiting a Pelican which was being fueled up. The Pilot kept cursing at how slowly the process was happening.

The Rangers all stood in full combat gear. As Dean looked over the faces of the Rangers one stood out to him.

"Eric?" he asked questioningly as the Ranger turned to face him.

A similar look of surprise showed on his brother's face.

"When did you get on board?" he asked surprised.

"About a couple months ago, you?" Dean questioned eagerly.

"Only a week or so ago." responded Eric.

At this point both the Ranger and ODSR squads were looking at the two brothers intrigued.

"And just who do ye think ye are?" the Scottish Sergeant asked to Eric squinting his eyes.

"Lay off it Sarge, he's my bro." said Dean after a moment.

The Sergeant took a good look at the two of them, "Well I'll be. Suppose the two of you joined up to protect each other right?" Said the Sergeant after a moment.

"Yes, but also to avenge our brother. He died innocently, a victim of a Covenant mortar attack on a colony." said Eric hardening his face.

"Now we're here to help maintain freedom in the UEG. William always spoke of the need to preserve independence and freedom." Dean added.

The Sergeant's face fell from its usual stern look. "I'm sorry Corporal; I didn't realize that had happened to you." he said awkwardly The only thing to do now is to make sure these Separatist idiots realize how much of a mess they got themselves into. You'll do that Corporal; you can avenge your brother that way."

"Yes sir." Dean said after a moment.

"Now go get yerself in the pods Laddie before I forget that you are on me squad."

Dean sent a wave to Eric who returned it before heading off and climbing in one of the SOIEV's. The door closed behind him and the pod descended and twisted so that he had a clear view of the planet below. He caught a glimpse of Eric with the rest of his squad entering a group of Pelicans. His view quickly shifted to the planet

again.

It seemed to be completely covered in machinery and factories.

"Dang Sarge!" Samantha said over the squadcom.

Ramirez whistled loudly.

"No doubt this is why we were tasked with helping the Republic try and capture the planet. Just look at it! The entire planet is a factory!" Li said with some degree of awe.

"Stow it Angel, how do we jump?" asked the Sergeant.

"Feet first!" yelled each member of Angel loudly.

A red light lit up the inside of Dean's pod. He clenched the controls and watched as the lights lit up.

Redâ€|

Yellowâ€|

Yellow flashingâ€|

Green,

"Here we go!" said Dean to himself.

He felt his stomach drop and watched as the pod dropped downwards. It started to shake as it started encountering the outermost layers of the atmosphere. Alex watched as a destroyed Republic "Venator" class cruiser drifted lazily in front of him. Debris hung around the destroyed vessel like some ghostly apparel.

The Republic had been fighting hard to secure this planet, (designated Alpha 1 by the UNSC) that was a source of enemy materials and assets. From the looks of things in high orbit it was very clear that the battle was costly for both sides.

He yanked on the controls to avoid a piece of a Munificent class star cruiser that had become tangled within the hulks of several Acclamators. Apparently the ship had used itself as a weapon with grisly results.

\_"Rest in peace Republic soldiers." Dean said as he looked at the carnage. The pod's comm unit came alive suddenly.

\_"This is Colonel Tarkov here. I'll be brief for all our sakes. On the ground is a dozen heavy artillery and AA emplacements. Our objective is to detonate all of them to lessen pressure on the Republic Clones who are trying to capture the main command center. The Army has a Ranger Unit guarding a pass that will enable you to proceed with our mission. As soon as your emplacement is gone contact me for further orders. Tarkov out." \_He finished in his Hungarian accent.

"Angel, sixty to ground!" said the Sergeant over the squadcom. Meet at my position and we take out those guns!"

"Copy that." said Dean as he prepared for final drop procedures.

"This isn't a movie Corporal Gunther." The Sergeant responded.

Dean blushed slightly. He looked down at the ever approaching ground. He mentally counted down and slammed his hands on the brakes.

The pod jolted as the airbrakes released in conjunction with the rocket thrusters firing from beneath. The pod lost speed instantly. Alex steeled himself and the pod struck with violent force against the ground. He yanked his BR55HB SR out of its holster and popped the seal on the pod doors.

A Battle Droid stood right in front of him eyeing the pod curiously. The door blew off and smashed the droid into a heap of sparking scrap. Several others angered at the sudden loss of their comrade started firing ruby red bolts at him.

"WOAH that's hot!" he yelled as a blaster bolt flew past his helmet. He ducked behind a boulder jutting out of the ground. He heard a burst of gunfire and the enemy fire ceased."

"Hey Deacon, you owe me one." Specialist Towson as he emerged from his own pod.

"Thanks Snark." Dean said after a moment to catch his breath.

"Yeah, don't mention it. Sarge's pod landed a half mile from here. Let's hightail to him and blow some stuff up."

"Lead the way." Dean said.

The two turned west and began a brisk jog. They encountered no resistance although the two were introduced to more than a few destroyed Republic Gunships. At least that was what their Intel said they were. They seemed to have dropped in the only part of the planet not covered in industry.

The "Larties" as they were known by Republic Soldiers were extremely versatile and well-armed. Although they certainly didn't look that way now as the two passed the wreckage of one still on fire giving off a lot of smoke. A large ridge presented themselves in behind the smoke and wreckage.

\_"Towson, Gunther, where the heck are you two?"\_ asked the Sergeant over the radio.

"Sorry Sarge, Snark answered. Deacon and I are coming up on a ridge. Where are you Sarge?"

A yellow highlighted point lit up on their HUD.

"That answer ye laddie's questions?" McKenzie spoke gruffly.

"Roger, we'll be there in 5 minutes." said Alex looking at the highlighted area, which was conveniently placed on top of the very same ridge that they were running to.

\_"Make it two ye overrated women."\_ said the Sergeant impatiently.

"I see the objective and we're runnin behind on time. Rest o' the squad's up 'ere. Mack out."\_

"Thanks Sarge." said Dean and cut the connection.

"He never changes does he?" said Snark as the two picked up their pace and started up the ridge.

Dean shrugged and the two started jogging up the side of the incline weaving their way on a path beat into the side by some sort of vehicle.

"Hey, look at that!" Dean said stopping Snark as he rounded the bend. Before them lay the ruins of the vehicle that had beat in the path. It possessed six legs and had a main gun on top as well as four secondary guns next to the cockpit. Several white bodies lay strewn around on the ground.

He knelt over the body of one of the clones. The white armor was blackened with streaks of gray smoke and dust somewhat hiding the blaster shot that killed the clone. The clone had white armor that was joined together in many pieces. A black body suit, most likely vacuum capable lay underneath. A helmet with a T-shaped visor covered the clone's face. The helmet also had a fin on top that was swept back.

"So this is a cloneâ€|" said Dean as he examined the body.

"There is a lot more behind the tank. I don't understand the bodies back there; there are slash marks like any energy swords but it doesn't look like any energy sword wound I've seen.

Intrigued, Dean stood up and walked over to where Snark was pointing. Sure enough at least a dozen more bodies lay there all in the action running away. He examined the nearest one where indeed some sword like device had sliced through the armor and burned away at the man's skin.

"We shouldn't stay here." Dean said quickly. Looking at the surrounding terrain and imagining how someone could hide himself in the cavities surrounding the tank.

Snark hesitated but then agreed.

The two started running up the side again. The two sensed the top was near so they picked it up running slightly faster. They rounded the bend at the top to run smack into Amanda.

"Oww!" she protested as she was shoved into the rock face.

"Ughâ€| sorry Magnet." Dean said rubbing his helmet where she had collided as she got to her feet and glared at him.

"Geez, you really are a magnet Amanda!" Snark laughed aloud.

The rest of the squad emerged around the corner.

"Yer late." the Sergeant said angrily.

"Sorry Sarge. We decided to stop by and shop at the nearest

convenience store and then go buy food for the squad." Snark said with his trademark sarcastic comments.

"Uh huh," he said not amused. "I saw you and Gunther stop and see the sights down at the bottom.

Snark's face fell; he opened his mouth to retort.

"Stow it Snark." The Sergeant said simply prompting Towson. "Now, to everyone else what do you see over there?"

The rest of the team looked over to where the Sergeant pointed. Below the ridge a good quarter of a mile out stood two AA positions as well as a proton cannon artillery piece.

That's not what caught their attention however. Scattered among the emplacements and area were several large groups of what could only be droids. They were all moving west to where the Rangers were supposed to be set up.

"Looks like the Army is going to be caught in an anvil." noted Ramirez.

"But what's that over there?" asked Li pointing at another group of objects.

"Let me find out." said the Sergeant.

Dean took grabbed a pair of binoculars from a pair of hands and looked at the group Li had pointed out.

He was vaguely aware of the Sergeant talking to Intelligence aboard the Blinding Doubt.

"Tanks." Was all he said turning to the group.

"Those guys are gonna be screwed if we don't remove those guns." said Sergei.

"Agreed, let's get the guns taken out." The Sergeant gruffly said.

The team nodded and they moved off into the night.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Allied Species Designated Planet Alpha 1:  
<strong>

\*\*Tobali System, \*\*

\*\*Andromeda Galaxy, 3:30 hours December 3\*\*\*\*rd\*\*\*\* 2559\*\*

\*\*CAS Class Carrier Blinding Doubt\*\*

William paced around the bridge of the Carrier Blinding Doubt while monitoring the battle around the planet displayed on a holographic projector. Several smaller ones displayed the ongoing surface battles. Another monitored the battle between the Republic and Separatist Naval forces.



The two fleets were hammering away at each other leaving a stream of wreckage and decompressed floating hulks of scrap. Even though it was really late the ship and the rest of the fleet that had been gathered had been brought up to immediate combat alert. All Allied Species operations were being directed by the UNSC Infinity.

"Commander, you're going to burn a hole through the plating at this rate." Remarked Chelsea as she observed the scene.

"Remind why, we're not down on the ground?" asked William as he came to a stop.

"You're not down there yet because I requested it and your ship the Dauntless has still not completed repairs." said Moram as he observed the progressing battle.

William said nothing but inside was tensed up. Ripa had left a half hour ago to engage the CIS in space combat, his brother Alex was down on the ground virtually surrounded and had yet to make contact with Republic forces around them. The Shipmaster had only requested that he remain behind in case of unforeseen variables.

"Fleetmaster, we are requested to move into position." said Communications after a second.

The Fleetmaster considered his options for a moment.

"Move the ships into position and charge weaponry."

Far off a Venator turned into a miniature sun as turbolaser weaponry set off the reactor.

Another Acclamator was trying to flee from the Separatist warships.

"Fleetmaster! We have an incoming transmission from the Corrusca!" Communications yelled above the din of the bridge.

"Play it." He said after a moment.

"Attention all Allied Species Warships! This is the Acclamator Corrusca! We're carrying a payload of wounded soldiers! We're under heavy fire and we're about to break up! Requesting immediate assistance!" \_

Moram quickly strode over from his gravity chair.

"RSS Corrusca! The is under way, help is arriving!" he strode over to the hologram of the space battle."

"Helm set course 029 by 67 and increase burn to 150% Get us to pass right behind the Corrusca!" He said staring at the hologram.

The hum of the ship grew louder and jolted somewhat as it leaped to the rescue of the Republic Assault Ship.

"Shipmaster, we are in range of weaponry!" said the Weapons Officer.

"FIRE TORPEDOES!" he roared.

The ship shook as the torpedoes launched themselves at the Banking Class frigate that was trailing it. The torpedoes splashed across the hull cutting through the shields as they winked out. The second one gouged itself through the vessel and blew it apart leaving molten wreckage.

The Acclamator now relieved of the pressure joined the rest of the outside perimeter of the Allied Species Ships.

The bridge roared in triumph as they fired another salvo and eliminated a Munificent class Cruiser that tried pursuing the Acclamator.

Their triumph soon turned into fury as a SDV class Corvette crossed paths in front of the Blinding Doubt exploded in a ball of plasma as a Providence class Carrier retaliated with vengeance.

"Charge Energy Projectors and aim at their bridge!" roared Moram as the ship flew past the wreckage of the Corvette.

A beam of concentrated superheated plasma erupted from one of the energy projectors as the Carrier passed by it. Turbolaser bolts erupted from it and impacted the Glorious Salvation shaking it and making the lights dim briefly. The ship responded with a healthy dose of pulse lasers, plasma turrets and plasma torpedoes.

The Providence Class Carrier fared much worse as the shields collapsed. Beams of plasma carved their ways into the ship causing explosions on multiple decks. The energy projector had the greatest effect of it as it completely burst apart the bridge and proceeded cut the ship in half leaving two violently decompressing hulks. As the two halves drifted apart the bridge was shocked to see numerous small troop transports that were hiding behind it that were landing additional reinforcements.

"Fleetmaster! I count at least 400 troop transports, scans indicate with Republic Intelligence that's at least 2,000 additional troops!" a minor roared.

"Track their descent! I want to know possible landing locations! Helm get us away from the center of this, I want to be on station to provide aid!"

"Aye Sir!" said the Bridge in general.

Moram turned to William who had been watching the entire time.

"Spartan, you're cleared for ground contact. Report to the hangar at once, a SpecOps Team and lances of infantry will accompany you in transports to the surface."

"Yes sir." He said with a hint of relief. He quickly exited out of the bridge with Chelsea and ran to the hangar as Moram 'Katar started barking out orders in rapid Sangheili.

"Commander, where do you think the reinforcements are going to land?" asked Chelsea.

"If I had to guess, I would assume they would ever reinforce their main command and control center or deploy the troops to remove the threat the Ranger and ODS units are to their defensive capabilities."

"I bet they'll love that." Said Chelsea as they rounded a corner and proceeded through a door.

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>Behind enemy lines<strong>\_

\*\*Alpha 1:  
><strong>

"Well this is just great." Amanda said as she spied three dropships coming in through the still black sky with her VISR. They had just set the charges on a large artillery emplacement that was doubling as an AA gun as well. The group was running away again. They had already gone and taken out two of the guns opening up a wide swath for air support. They ducked behind a large rock Amanda hit the detonator. The emplacement lit up and exploded sending fragments of the gun everywhere. Li yelled as a particularly large piece came down in front of him.

The large twisted piece struck right in between his legs and fell over on top of them pinning him down.

"Umm, guys? A little help?" he yelled as he struggled to move his legs from under it.

"Li! Do you want the entire world to find out we're here?" hissed Snark.

"Shut it Snark! Everybody, we need to move! Get this metal off him and let's fall out!" the Sergeant said ending the outburst.

The squad moved and slowly heaved it off Li who was grunting in pain as he tried to free himself.

Finally with a massive grunt the squad lifted it off Li long enough for him to scramble out from underneath.

"Well, I think we're good." Dean said.

The world suddenly turned white as a massive explosion lit up the night and rocked the world right behind them sending all of them flying.

"Tanks!" screamed Clarissa over another two explosions that lit up the world again.

Dean's HUD immediately polarized itself as another flash tore through the sky. Through the view of his VISR and Nightlight mode he saw the fifteen quickly approaching objects in the distance. Preceding the wall of armor was innumerable rows of battle droids.

"Mother Russiaâ€|" Sergei gasped.

"Oh myâ€¦!" gasped Amanda.

All at once the turrets on the tanks swiveled to their position.

"RUN!" yelled Dean as they all simultaneously fired.

This time explosions rained down all around them. They were only saved by their rocky cover again.

Dean took off running, Miguel leading them as they weaved their way around more rocks.

"Where's the rest of the division that dropped?!" Yelled Dean as he struggled to stay alive among the firestorm of explosions raining down all around them. "ODST's and Rangers are supposed to be falling back to the south side of a canyon."

"And where is that?" asked Miguel over the TeamCom."

"10 clicks." McKenzie said reluctantly. Bee and several others cursed as they ducked behind another rock to catch their breath.

"We can't stay here in the open." Said Amanda.

"Way to state the obvious Amanda!" Ben said as he readjusted his SPNKR launcher over his shoulder.

"She's right." Snark said as he bent down and readjusted his gear as well.

"Closest place is the factory over there." said Clarissa depolarizing her visor.

"That also happens to be the one that's heavily guarded." Sergei pointed out.

Another explosion sent them huddling down again.

"Do we have any other choice?" asked Towson.

"I'd rather take my chances over there then here." Said Miguel.

Sergeant McKenzie stared at the slowly approaching armor, the canyon way further to the south, and the borders of the industrialized complex.

"Right," he said breaking the silence between the team members. "We're running for the factory. We're going to try and skirt it and make it over to the Republic's battle line. Bee, think you can take a couple of the tanks out? Create a distraction of some sort?"

He sat and pondered a second. "You guys have any of the cluster missile mines on you?" There was a pause while several of the squad members checked themselves.

"Got a few." Sergei said retrieving four half foot-long tubular war heads. "I was hoping to save them for a firefight but now's a good time as ever."

"Deacon," the Sergeant barked.

"Sir?"

"Stay behind with Bee paint some targets for him."

"Got it." He said feeling a pit grow inside.

"Okay, the rest of you on Bee's mark we double time it for the factory. Don't stop unless we have to. Bee?"

Dean looked over to see Bee remove the ammo from his SPNKR and replace it with the mine.

He finished and handed a laser designator to Dean. He flipped it on and carefully poked out behind the rock.

"Deacon," said Bee carefully. "As soon as I give the word you are to select the four biggest groups of armor you can. Point it at four different locations that will cover as many tanks as humanly possible. Highlight number oneâ€¦now."

Dean squinted through the scope and painted an area in the relative middle between the first line and a cluster.

"Marked." He said.

"Highlight confirmed." Bee said. "Sarge start running."

"Go go go!" Duncan yelled as Bee took aim at an angle and fired. A thump was heard as the rocket propellant ignited and the charge took flight arcing high up in the air. The rest of the squad tore out of their cover and made a beeline for the buildings.

"Deacon! Mark another!" Bee roared over the noise of armor suddenly opening up. Dean quickly selected another group relatively close to the the first painted area.

"Mark!" he yelled.

"Sync! Fire!" Bee yelled instantaneously. A second thump drowned out the noise of the armor for a second. Dean saw the first mine strike into the great throwing up a cloud of dirt. Seconds later the second one buried. They repeated the process throwing the last two mines at the group.

"Now what?" Dean asked. "How big is this thing going to be?"

Bee smiled and pulled out the detonator. He held up in his free hand five fingers and counted down.

Dean looked over.

For a moment nothing happened. Then all at once hundreds of fiery red contrails burst out of the ground from the four locations and into the air then they all exploded simultaneously downwards sending white hot armor piercing shrapnel and explosive shells into the armor convey while at the same time the mines all exploded lifting the earth up and filling the area with fire. The resulting explosions and

heat knocked Dean and Bee back into cover as there HUD's whined angrily their helmets dampening the shock and concussion of the blast.

After a second they peeked back. For a second the area was covered with thick smoke. Then the smoke cleared and a smile broke on Alex's face as he observed almost every tank in the column either ripped apart or disabled. Dean and Bee broke out into wild idiotic cheering. They were interrupted by a very gruff but satisfied Sergeant ordering them to regroup.

The two ODST's after replacing the ammo in the SPNKR took off at a fast pace to try and rejoin their squad. As they entered the outskirts of the complex they became more wary and cautious with weapons out and at their sides. They ran silently past ghostly and silent machinery. They were tense and on edge. "Hold up! What's that noise?" Asked Alex holding up his hand signaling Bee to stop.

The faint sound of the howl of a vehicle(s) came drifting towards them and got progressively louder.

"Deacon! Bee! Hide yourself! You got contacts heading towards to you."

"Shoot!" said Dean to nobody in general as he saw a column of Battle droids on a programed patrol.

They both dove behind a stack of crates and waited ready to spring into action and run if need be. They waited a tense minute and a half as a column of STAP's and droid riders hovered past . The two soldiers waited for an eternity while the column advanced slowly. Dean felt an eerie prickle down his back. He peeked out for a second with the VISR mode on his helmet activated and immediately ducked as he saw a pale white woman walk by highlighted in the low light by an orange outline. She stopped for a second, silently Dean, gestured to Bee, and motioned that they would need to make a quick getaway. They both tensed as the mechanical clanking of the droids stopped suddenly.

Fear rose in Dean. They needed to get away. The woman gave him a really, bad, feeling. On three, he gestured with his hand and a square of C4 he had removed from his rucksack. Bee waited, gesturing that he would tell when.

Suddenly the crates they were hiding behind flew forward exposing the two ODST's.

"Crap!" Alex yelled aloud as he threw the explosive material towards the group of enemies. It landed near the woman and group of droids he promptly shot at it. The plastic explosive lit up in a fireball and deafening blast.

A cloud of smoke rose up between the ODST's and the Confederacy.

"Run!" yelled Bee seizing the opportunity. The two fired a burst or two with their weapons and dashed wildly away.

Behind them a sudden whoosh sent the smoke away.

"Bee?!" asked the Sergeant over their helmet-coms. "What in tarnation was that ye bleedin fools?"

"We're kinda in a situation Sarge!" yelled Alex as he turned a corner with Bee,

Straight into a group of Droidekas.

Bee cursed and yanked Dean sideways into a narrow alley out of the torrent of ruby red bolts that erupted suddenly.

The two stopped for a second to catch their breath but suddenly ducked as a crimson blur flashed over their heads. Alex felt the heat of it as it passed inches over his head. They dropped again to the ground as it returned like a boomerang back from its origin.

Bee swore again and the two of them yanked themselves up as the Woman from earlier sprinted around the corner in pursuit.

Dean screamed. It wasn't the manliest thing to do but considering the fact that there was a mad sword wielding woman moving at extremely fast speeds towards them he figured it was only natural. Dean brought up his Battle Rifle and sprayed lead at her. Bee did likewise. Then in a jaw dropping display the Woman caught the lightsaber (it looked like one) and ignited another one and spun around catching every single bullet fired liquefying them to molten metal in a frenzied series of spins and twirls with her body and blades.

Out of ammo for their rifles they stopped dumbstruck. "Who the heck are you?" said Bee weakly the red glow from the blades outlining both of them and in crimson light.

The woman smiled and spoke in a sinister voice saying, "Awwh, how nice that you were to ask me. I\_ am fear.\_ I am the \_queen of a blood-soaked planet\_ and an architect of genocide. I have helped to \_crack\_ the galaxy in half with this war and conquered every enemy I have ever facedâ€"including \_death\_. All except for you and your other friends in the UNSC. I am Asajj Ventress now you will join the thousands that I have slain." Smiled and twisted both sabers in a reverse grip.

"Aw crap." Dean said regretfully as he waited for his final moments. Suddenly the wall next to her on Dean's left exploded outwards sending big chunks of rock and metal. The woman turned towards the explosion only to be caught by a giant piece of rubble that sent her through the wall of the other building.

Dean and Bee looked around to see their saviors when Sergeant McKenzie and their squad emerged from the building on the left.

"Come on you bloomin' idiots!" yelled the Sergeant. Dean and Bee both scrambled in after them and entered the building. They ran into a large open silent assembly hall that had fallen silent. Ahead of them another hole had been blasted through the wall and they ran through the breach.

"Shouldn't we be calling in for back up?" asked Clarissa as they all vaulted over a giant metal beam that had fallen ages ago.

"Yeah, who was that creep back there?" asked Li?

Dean toggled the general broadcast function of his comm and spoke as he ran.

"This is Corporal Alex Gunther of the 350th! We are being pursued by a crazy witch lady! We need some serious back up! I repeat this is..."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Spartan "Will" Gunther<strong>

\*\*Phantom en route to surface of Alpha 1:\*\*

The bay of the Phantom was oddly silent as the Phantom descended into enemy territory. The Phantom had just overheard a communication from an ODSF squad (apparently Dean's since he had given the message) that had gotten stuck behind enemy lines and was currently being pursued by what Intel had reported to be a dark Jedi. Personal feelings aside he was rather tense and worried. As a precaution they had contacted the Republic and a flight of Gunships with Clone sappers and Generals Tano and Skywalker were in route right now. In addition, a duo of Pelican's with a Ranger Squad was en route to help in a pincer movement from the extreme flank of the battlefield. Two Spirits flanked behind them.

\_"We are approaching." \_ The Phantom's pilot said, \_"Warriors, prepare yourselves for battle." \_

The group of SpecOps Elites and their Carbine wielding Kig-Yar comrades checked their weapons. The grunts in the bay prepared themselves. Shields were activated, Charges loaded, and the bay doors on either side of the Phantom swung down with a grunt manning each of the Type 52 Plasma Cannons.

William shouldered a MA5D, checked that it was loaded and gestured to Chelsea on the far side who was shouldering a M45E Tactical Shotgun. The Phantom descended until it was hovering over the ground. A light lit up in the bay and everybody disembarked. William jumped first, being the leader of this operation to rescue those behind enemy lines and cause some damage. A second Phantom came in and more Sangheili and a couple pairs of Hunters disembarked into the eerily still night.

"We all accounted for?" William asked over the team-com.

Various replies reached him. Satisfied everyone was ready he scanned around.

"I want a lance of Jackals and Skirmishers on the tops of those buildings. Break off a couple Sangheili and have them join with them, everyone else we need to move quickly to figure out where they are. Keep the Hunters on our flanks and I want a Phalanx of Infantry at the rear. Let's move quickly and silently. Don't engage unless seen." He finished.

Again grunts and words of acknowledgement reached his ears and the group of fifty or so moved to their assigned locations. A group of Sangheili and the Hunters moved to the rear with some of the grunts



wielding Fuel rods or Needlers. A large number of the Jackals and Skirmishers moved quickly to the upper levels using their incredibly agility to get into position. Everyone else separated into two groups with William leading the first and Chelsea leading the second.

They moved quickly and stealthily.

"This place seems abnormally quiet." He spoke to Chelsea.

"Think we were too late?" he asked.

"Don't think so, we would've heard."

\_"This is Pelican Yankee Foxtrot Niner; we are entering the complex on foot now where would you like us." \_ The voice of a Pilot came over the radio.

"Roger Foxtrot Niner, what's your position?"

\_"Currently they are disembarking on a large flat piece of land in front of the ravine you guys passed. They're on top of the buildings right now as we speak. Quarter click away." \_ The pilot responded smartly.

On cue an explosion was heard far off in front of them and a pillar of smoke quickly rose in the dark sky blotting out any light from further ahead.

"Move towards the smoke." William ordered concealing his sudden alarm and worry.

\_"This is Major Crespo, we're the Ranger Detachment disembarking." \_came a female voice over the radio. \_"Do you want us to move towards smoke?"\_ she asked.

"No, hang over there and stay low. We'll drive them towards you."

\_"Acknowledged. Crespo out." \_The Army Major replied.

\_"Hang on Alex, We're coming!" \_he thought as they all sprinted towards the smoke.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Corporal Alex Gunther <strong>

"You have got to be joking!" yelled Towson frustrated as they launched a volley of SPNKR rockets, courtesy of Bee at a Tank that had been following them.

Dean ducked back around the corner as a trio of Super Battle Droids launched miniature rockets from their non-blaster arm at the squad. The rockets connected with what a tank that was filled with something very flammable and explosive creating a massive fireball that wrecked the tank and droids sending a cloud of smoke and creating a massive BANG that their helmets thankfully dampened.

"Come on amigos, we gotta run!" said Miguel fearfully.

"I'm with the Mexican!" Sergei declared. Miguel took point and led the squad forward with Clarissa and Dean at the back of the squad.

"Hang a left!" the Sergeant yelled as they approached a T intersection. They vaulted around the corner straight into another group of Battle Droids which proceeded to fire instantaneously at the group which backpedaled around the corner again.

"Scratch that! I'm NOT with the Mexican said Sergei collapsing behind cover. Dean brought up his Battle Rifle and fired three bursts. The rounds caught off a trio and ripped open their metallic bodies and shredding circuitry. Li and Towson joined in with continuous fire from their Assault Rifles and the rest of the patrol lay sparking and smoking.

"Next time we stick with Magnet then, growled Miguel. "I'd hit you Sergei but now's not the time or place!"

Li chuckled but that was short lived as they heard a faint buzzing and then leaped out of the way as a red lightsaber impaled the building where Li had just stood.

"\*\*\*\*!" cursed Li and the rest of the squad were moving again. Behind them the lightsaber twisted and shot out of the wall back to where Ventress stood from afar.

"RUN!" yelled Amanda with newly found fright taking off running. The rest of the squad ran behind.

"Holy crap!" Dean yelled again as another saber flashed overhead nearly decapitating him. He was saved by a small stumble. The rest of the squad turned left and sprinted into an open stretch of land. Amanda suddenly skidded and flailed about as the edge of a ravine roared up at them. She caught herself as well as the other members.

"Oh no! We're screwed! We're screwed!" said Clarissa losing control of her emotions.

Alex's heart dropped. It was by no way a survivable fall. At the bottom Alex could faintly see sharp jagged rocks looming up at them. He turned around as a faint red glow, illuminated the night behind. Striding forward to them with the moon illuminating her pale white skin was Ventress a satisfied gleeful smile etched upon her face. Both Sabers held to the side angling down. Behind her an army of droids marched mechanically, a LOT of droids. The sound of their feet clanking was a death toll in Alex's ears.

"Nice knowing ye laddie's." said Sergeant McKenzie defeated yet still trying to keep some of his Scottish fire in his voice.

She slowly moved closer forcing the group back until they were on the edge of the cliff. She stopped and the army stopped behind her.

"Fools!" she sneered. "Did you really think you could escape this place, or me?" she cackled triumphantly. "This entire planet was a testing ground. You came here for nothing! This planet has nothing of strategic value, a testing ground to see how much of a threat you

really were. I can see it now! You and your UNSC will all fall before the rising darkness; and right now you will learn who I am. I am Asajj Ventress; I am the \_slayer\_ of thousands, the \_burner\_ of worlds, and the \_extinguisher\_ of life in this galaxy!" She yelled in contempt. She softened slightly and sickeningly sweet. "Now it's time for you to \_die\_, you have evaded me far too long."

She raised a hand and spread it outward or up. Li suddenly screamed and dropped his weapon and began flailing around as he was lifted into the air six feet. The rest of the team scrabbled and tried yanking him down. Dean noticed an extreme look of concentration arose on her face.

Suddenly he was released and collapsed on most of them.

"How?!" asked Dean as he got up to his feet.

"This is but a taste of the power I hold!" Ventress cackled again. "This is the power of the Force. And \_I wield\_ it. Would you like to be the first to die?" She laughed again and spread forth both hands. Suddenly arcs of electricity shot forth and engulfed Dean and the squad. He gasped as a sensation unlike any he felt before shocked him into oblivion. Then the pain engulfed him.

It wasn't normal pain or electricity, no, as Dean writhed on the ground as electricity crackled all over the ground he could feel it being molded, twisted, fueled by an immense hatred and contorted to make him suffer. Dean's vision went red and he started to lose consciousness.

Ventress screamed and laughed maniacally as she watched them thrash about with pain their screams a heavenly chorus in her ears. Suddenly many things happened and time slowed down.

Through Dean's blurry vision he saw what looked like half a dozen Republic Gunship diving for them. Behind Ventress the unmistakable shape of a hunter pair from behind fired a volley of shots from its cannon. And everything exploded into chaos.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Well there you go! One more chapter to join the ranks! This story is now 30,000 words! <em>

\_We have Ventress make an appearance, the Spartans off to the rescue, and Moram being a pretty beastly Fleetmaster, and a second brother of Will to join the ranks!\_ \_Dean goes into combat against the droids and is facing a cliffhanger! Literally! I thought I did a nice job writing that section of the space battle.  
><em>

\_Continue to read and review to notate any questions or otherwise! One question for the audience. It has again been put forth it might be a better story should it be in first person perspective. What sayest the audience? \_

\_This chapter has been edited to reflect the official names for Will's two brothers who were introduced in this chapter. Enjoy!\_

\_Yours in writing,  
><em>

\*\*\_theotherpianist\_\*\*

## 8. Chapter 8

\_Hello, \*\*theotherpianist\*\* is back with another chapter. I was pleased to receive more reviews. Many thanks to those that took time to review.\_

\_This was a fun-ish chapter to write. When brainstorming it was really hard to decide upon a plot afterwards and this was the only decent thing I could come up with. I would like to keep this somewhat semi-realistic, if this bothers you, my apologies. I hope future ones will satisfy you. I think this is one of my less decent chapters honestly, but you may think differently. If you feel the need to flame, don't. Say it some other way.\_

\_This chapter is more action oriented and then a lot more backgroundish. You may read accordingly.\_

\_But before we delve into the story it's time we cover a few reviews:

><em>

\*\*\_YourFavGuest: \_\*\*\_I\_\_'m going to assume this is the person who's been there since the beginning. Thank you. I thought I did an o-k job with it. Glad you liked it. Any further suggestions? Thanks for your commentary\_

\*\*\_scottusal: \_\*\*\_Yeah, she'll be doing some running...\_

\_\*\*LordGhostStriker:\*\* Aside from the language this comment made my day :D

>Thanks for the morale boost! So true though!<em>

\*\*\_CAPTAIN JASE S-412: \_\*\*\_Ventress is a pretty demonic individual, I tried to portray that accurately. I hope it wasn't over the top for you, I think Ventress is a pretty terrifying individual. The Clone Wars doesn't do her any justice.\_

\_\*\*Naginator: \*\*Your comments both make an excellent points. A cookie for you, I decided to take creative license with this which is why I added nationalities. As for blasters it's up for debate I couldn't find anything to confirm or deny. Good job though.\_ \_\_\*\*Utterbotania: \*\*Thanks again. See \*\*YourFavGuest\*\* for comments on squad dynamics. Thanks for reviewing!\_\_

\_\*\*gandalf: \*\*? ...What sailor moon crossover? I haven't written anything of the sort. I mean, I favorited an SG-1 Sailor Moon crossover but that was it. You sure you have the right person. Clarification wanted.\_

\*\*\_Admiral Hater:\_\*\*\_Exactly, I love how Del Rio is universally hated by all. Not to sound evil but I enjoyed writing his character in a way that elicited that hatred of the character. He will play an important role later on. Be prepared to hate. \_

**\*\*\_MrToasterMan:\_\*\*\_** Glad you're loving it, See the above for comments on Del Rio, thank you for reviewing thrice.

><em>

**\*\*\_HALO:\_\*\*\_**Once again, the whole OC x Ahsoka thing I think is over done. I mean, I can already think of four or five fics that use this. I mean I could but I would like to finish this first.\_

**\*\*\_Ventros:\_\*\*\_**You are correct, I wanted to try and do something new. I guess I didn't put two and two together. Technically Lt. Commander's and Commanders can command such ships. I don't know how to fix what's been set in stone. Sorry if this bothered you too much. I did add a segment of their backlash but it probably wasn't enough. *\*Edit\** William is... well you'll see. I'm plotting this out. Thanks for noticing.  
><em>

\_Without any further delay, \_

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter Eight:<p>

**\*\*Planet designated Alpha 1: \*\***

**\*\*Tobali System, \*\***

**\*\*Andromeda Galaxy, 4:45 hours December 3\*\*\*\*rd\*\*\*\* 2559\*\***

**\*\*Five minutes ago&#160;|\*\***

William pursued Ventress cautiously with a trio of Elites flanking him. They had successfully sent small units to chivy the droids into pursuing the ODST's right where they wanted. Ventress was guaranteed to have tried to follow and then monologue right before killing them. It was the perfect window opportunity to rescue, destroy hostiles, and eliminate a HVT, \_textbook\_ in fact.

"How we doing Sarah?" he asked the AI who was monitoring the battle.

\_"All are in position." she reported. "Republic is on standby."\_

The ODST's and been forced to the edge of the cliff where they realized they had been surrounded. Ventress was now striding forward.

\_"Allied Species Strike Force this is General Skywalker reporting in." \_the voice of the Jedi Knight interrupted his observations.

"Go ahead General." He said.

\_"We are in position now and we are ready for capture of Ventress\_" He said.

\_"Rangers ready on your mark Spartan." Major Crespo \_said chiming in.

"Read you loud and clear. On my mark and signal." said Will.

William motioned the Hunter pair forward. They charged their cannons, a sickly green light illuminating the immediate area.

"Fire in threeâ€|twoâ€|oneâ€|"

William gestured and the Hunters fired. The pair sported a fuel rod beam cannon that sprayed a lethal radioactive beam that cut through the army ahead of them. Many of the droids burst apart in heaps of sparking scrap or else exploded into shrapnel. Some unfortunate few were atomized to their basic components.

In any event the Hunter pair was outdone by the rest of the Allied Species who unveiled themselves suddenly. From all around the report and whine of plasma weaponry suddenly was drowned out by the report of Chelsea's M90 shotgun. William unhooked a grenade from the belt around him and tossed it. It exploded with a bang eliminating a group of five or so clustered together. Several Elites took his cue and tossed their own grenades which proceeded to adhere to the droids who tried to get it off.

The Ranger's quickly unveiled themselves and the sharp crack of DMR's and sniper fire filled the air instantly taking down a column of robotic forces.

Droids everywhere fell and collapsed, bursting, exploding, melting, shredded into razor sharp basic components.

William was becoming quickly surprised by the comical behavior of the opposition. He was quickly becoming aware that the "B1's" as they had been designated were not a serious threat unless they were in large numbers. The more serious threats were faced by the B2's, the B1's taller, heavier, deadlier cousins." He brought up the MA5D to his shoulder and fired a three second burst into the abdomen of one of the Super Battle Droids. It collapsed onto the ground in a heap and William leaped forward tossing another grenade. They were slow to react the oncoming attack.

However by now the Confederacy's attention had been turned to the advancing infantry. Concentrated blasterfire found their mark and a couple minors slumped to the ground. Enraged several others dashed forward igniting their swords in a fury slashing through their ranks. The droids continued firing at these new closer threats until they clutched their throats dead.

"Move up and secure Ventress!" William ordered. "Skywalker where are you?"

"Look up." He said cockily. He glanced up and saw seven LATT/I's streak in overhead from behind. The majority deployed their payload of Clone soldiers quickly and efficiently taking off again and filling the space where the droid army stood with lasers and many missiles.

Will observed the clones disembark and almost immediately un-shoulder their weapons and open fire. The all certainly had an aura about them off professionalism that showed in their combat. He had to admit to himself, Clones or not they were lethal warriors. Whoever they were

cloned from had to have been a master killer. He'd hunch his bets on a bounty hunter.

His thoughts were diverted by a Super Battle Droid that had proceeded to open fire on him. He ducked and the bolts of energy flew over him. He fired another three second burst that knocked it down and then switched targets. Knocking that one down as well he looked for Ventress. The Sith had inexplicably disappeared.

"Target lost! Where's Ventress?" He growled frustration showing in his voice.

Suddenly near where the Republic had landed a dual pair of red sabers lit up. He saw the flash of a strike and someone screamed. One of the Gunships overhead began unleashing a payload of missiles which decimated the Confederacy's ranks. Another blur of red light and the wing and engine exploded. It veered around trying to stay flying and crashed into another taking off. A fireball ensued and gave a great amount of heat as it consumed the wreckage.

A sudden wave of energy threw the flaming wreckage and other debris at the Allied Species and threw him, the other Clones, Allied Species, and the last dozen or so droids that were alive back. Another wave of a hand caused the sides of the buildings to suddenly fall off burying and trapping many under rubble. William watched in mute shock now buried as Ventress tore through those not buried with flicks and slashes of those lethal blades decapitating a Sangheili before slicing a grunt in two.

Her actions elicited an angry roar from the survivors buried. She turned and smiled to face Anakin and Ahsoka who were still standing between Ventress and the squad of ODS's.

"Skywalker!" she snarled.

"Well if it isn't the hairless harpy!" said Ahsoka.

She hissed at that remark and the three users of the Force squared off.

"This is Major Crespo." The voice of the Army Ranger blared in his helmet.

"Go ahead Major." He groaned as he struggled to extricate himself.

"We're on the roof tops with an angle. Permission to kill?"

"Shoot the witch!" he coughed as a piece of masonry fell on him.

Though he couldn't see him he saw the yellow dots of the Ranger's appear on his motion tracker. The three were still circling each other getting ready to attack.

Suddenly the air was split with a dozen plus sharp CRACKS that stunned the combatants. Ventress suddenly in another jaw dropping display caught every one of the sniper rounds fired and liquefied them into molten metal suddenly tiring her with the effort. Overhead several curses and startled remarks broke the silence immediately

after. Ventress without a second thought raised another hand and, with screams from the Rangers overhead threw her fist to the side and the Rangers all soared to instant death over the cliff edge. Anakin and Ahsoka stopped circling and brought up their own hands and "caught" them slowing them down and placing them next to the ODSTs. Even still more than a few had hard landings that caused them more pain.

William was helpless to watch as Ventress dashed away suddenly leaving Anakin and Ahsoka the only Jedi left.

"\_Target has fled proximity." \_Sarah stated.

Anakin extinguished his blade and cursed.

"Blast it we had here! If you hadn't ordered your men on the roof to open fire-" Anakin roared in frustration.

"And she runs to fight another day." glowered Ahsoka.

"There's no point in fighting about it now! We have people trapped under rubble!" yelled William breaking through.

That silenced Anakin.

Anakin moved toward them and concentrating with Ahsoka moved the rubble off Will and the other troopers. As more and more people were excavated Will started requesting more and more medical transports as the extent of damage done from Ventress's blast was revealed. Nearly everyone save himself and Chelsea, the Clone Troopers, and a few of the Allied Species soldiers were injured in same way shape or form.

He spotted the prone figure of Dean sprawled on the ground. A nasty gash on his arm that had torn through the tough Body Armor. Satisfied it wasn't serious he detached a trauma kit from his leg. He pulled out a canister of Bio-Foam and began to stitch it up.

\* \* \*

><p>Dean moaned and opened his eyes gingerly as he felt someone probe a needle into him. He woke up to see the Spartan standing over him injecting a can of bio foam into his torso somewhere.<p>

"On your feet soldier. We can't stay here anymore." He said helping him to his feet. He stood up with a grunt and observed a scene of total chaos.

All around him was fire and destruction. The Allied Species soldiers were trying to extricate survivors from the rubble. What most found were bodies. Angry roars for vengeance or howl of grief filled the air. Alex turned to find his team and found them all gathered around one figure.

He pushed his way through and saw Clarissa, helmet knocked off her eyes contorted in her death throes. A sudden burst of anger filled him as he knelt down and confirmed she was dead. Killed by Ventress. His eyes traced downwards and in the center of her heart were two charred holes from Ventress's lightsabers.



His vision turned red and he raised a fist to the sky and roared as well with all the rage and energy he could muster.

"That \*\*\*\*\*!" Gaspd Miguel as he looked over Clarissa's body as Dean finished.

Dean noticed that everyone except Amanda was there looking at her body.

"Guys, where's Amanda?" He questioned fearfully.

A wave of fear and dread washed over all assembled.

"Amanda?!" the squad all started calling out with the same fear.

The started expanding their search in an ever bigger circle. Alex's mind went blank.

\_"No, no-no, please not another one of us!" \_he thought.

"Guys!" screamed Samantha choking down a sob.

They all ran over.

Dean had to avert his eyes to look. Amanda was impaled on a piece of rebar. She was still breathing though but it was very labored. The injury wasn't as bad as he had seen but seeing her painfully twisted and impaled was too much.

"Move aside!" he ordered suddenly looking back to her. He looked it up and down.

"We can still save her! Someone hand a metal cutter to me!" he yelled.

Sergei tossed the tool to him. Alex bent down and with great effort cut through the thick piece.

With her body now freed from its ghastly push-pin it slumped to the ground.

"We need a transport ASAP!" he roared to no one in particular.

"We got one thirty seconds out!" yelled one of the Ranger's." he looked over and saw his brother Eric again.

"Well this is certainly convenient." He said bitterly beginning to break down.

"Move her to the edge of the cliff so we can get all on board ASAP!" He said ignoring him.

He looked him up and down as well.

"You're wounded too! Can't you see it?" he questioned incredulously.

"I can freaking feel it!" yelled the Ranger angrily gesturing to a large gouge wound from something torn in the explosion. It was bandaged but it would need more attention in a dozen hours.

"Just help me move her!" said Dean feeling his temper rise. The other members of his squad were transporting Clarissa and her remains aboard the Pelican that just landed. Alex observed with mute shock the body bag that his teammate was sealed forever in. He watched as they sealed up her face.

"I'll kill thatâ€|thatâ€|\_freak\_" he bellowed angrily as Ventress flared up in his mind again.

"Cool it Corporal!" the female Spartan ordered shocking some sense back into him.

"The Sith just killed my teammate!" he bellowed. "Where is the heartless-"

"I said COOL it soldier! Or did you forget there are others here that just lost friends as well?!" the male Spartan shouted making him retreat a few steps back.

"No..sir."

"Are you capable of fighting?" asked the Spartan again.

"...Yes sir." he said after a moment.

"Then prepare to move out." underneath his cold voice was a note of sympathy and compassion. Alex seized onto it and gathered himself and his wits together.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Spartan William<strong>

William watched the ODST stagger away back to his squad now missing a member.

By now the Search and Rescue teams had rescued everyone alive and were preparing those who didn't make it for transport.

There was a still large group of able-bodied men left. There was the entirety of the Ranger's, the Hunter Pair, the squad of ODST's and the remnants of the Sangheili led lances of SpecOp troops. Not nearly as many as William would have preferred but it was still better than nothing. That left the Republic, they had a lot more soldiers left unscathed than the Allied Species. The two sides were awkwardly mixing together. None really interacted with each other but stuck to their own side.

He decided to try and break that quickly and set an example.

He walked over to Generals Skywalker and Tano with a clone, decorated in blue accents to his armor, a blast skirt, and pauldrons covering his left arm.

"My apologies Spartan." said Anakin. "We were so close to capturing her to."

"Don't sweat it." he said.

"Have we introduced you to Captain Rex?" asked Ahsoka pointing to the clone.

"I don't believe I have." said William. He suddenly saluted.

"At ease soldier, I don't think you need to salute me."

"But you outrank me right?" asked the Spartan.

"Positions are irrelevant. It's experience that counts in my book. Judging from the amount I've heard about you Spartan you have enough. I don't understand why you were demoted from your position of Commander. That's a pretty significant fall."

William flinched and the Clone immediately backtracked.

"My apologies sir, I didn't mean to get-"

William waved it off.

"It's a story for another time."

"Will?" asked Chelsea running up.

"What is it?"

"We're ready to move right now."

"Tactical analysis suggests we should move out to engage the Separatist's on their unguarded flanks." \_Sarah chimed in over the external speakers.

"Sync, Generals?" Will said turning over command to them.

"Let's move out."

The Ranger's were divided into two groups on the side. Will noticed Eric climbing into the entrance on the Pelican and try to shrug his injuries off. He was reluctantly allowed a Huragok to heal him and soon disappeared as it flew off. The remnants of the Sangheili SpecOps soldiers were scattered throughout. The clones made up the center and the ODST's covered their flanks. The Generals and the Spartans took point.

The order was given and a brisk march took its place. The group settled in for the march, after about five minutes after they started jogging Will noticed Alex hanging back a little, he slowed his pace and allowed him to catch up. William had some guilt about yelling at his brother and decided that he would apologize.

They were crossing into a canyon now, they started descending into its bowels when the ODST spoke up.

"What do you want Spartan." said Dean coldly as William matched his pace with his.

"I wanted to apologize soldier."

"For what?"

"I might've been too hard on you earlier. Have you ever lost someone close to you before?" he asked.

"I guess...not. I mean the only time I've had that happen was when I was much younger and just now."

"Who was it when you were younger?" he probed.

"My...oldest brother."

Will found it hard to swallow for a second.

"Was he a great person?"

"He was just like any of us. I never really guessed how much I actually would hurt until he never made it off the planet. We were traveling when it was suddenly attacked. We got split and he just...told me to run and that he would find us eventually. That was it. Never saw him again."

He looked down again, and then back at William.

"How do you do it?"

"What?" asked William surprised.

"I mean, you've obviously lost people close to you before right? How...do you go about dealing with it, or do you at all?"

"Corporal, I've had that happen before many times. Technically I was a Commander of a large special forces team. There were twelve of us in the very beginning. Now there are two." he pointed up at Chelsea who was scanning the area ahead moving with her weapon at the ready.

"How...?"

"It doesn't matter how. I had trained with each of them from the very beginning. It was hard to accept that they were all gone. Your brothers and sisters all in an instant, gone. And you can't bring them back. I don't really know for myself how I dealt with it. All I know that it's an individual thing. I found parts of my family later on which gave me some comfort but, I can't replace your brother, or your squad member, or my team, or Ash..." he stopped.

"Has it been bothering you since we came here?"

"Let's face it Corporal. We have a UNSC distress signal from somewhere inside this galaxy. All we know is that it's UNSC. And, for whatever reason I know that it's somehow connected with those I lost. It has to."

"Will, I need you up here. General's are discussing stratagem, you might want to listen in." said Chelsea over a private channel.

"Roger." was all he spoke back.

"Corporal, I'm going to have to cut this short. We're arriving shortly at the target."

He said nothing back but waved him on.

Will easily caught up to the head of the column.

"What's the target?" asked William as he approached the two Jedi.

"We're approaching a large Comm station, your superiors believe it to have data on where your SOS signals originated from. We're currently breaking our backs over it right now. We're going to flank and take it swiftly." said Anakin.

"We're just charging through?"

"Yup." said Ahsoka chiming in.

Up ahead the crested over top of a hill and looked down on a large plain.

All around below was the scene of a frenzied battle.

Explosions of all sorts lit up the world below. Above the Republic was dueling with the CIS in the sky, Capital warships raining stygian fire and smoke on each other. Two UNSC Frigates were providing air support to the troops below. The scene was a mass of smoke, gunfire from laser, plasma, and chemical weaponry.

"This should be fun." said Chelsea.

"You know, you could almost pass for Obi-Wan."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Outskirts of Separatist COM station<strong>

\*\*6:04 hours UNSC STANDARD MILITARY TIME\*\*

Will rested with the rest of the group at the top of a hill overshadowing the comm station. They had been in contact with friendly forces who had now redoubled their efforts at breaking through to provide distraction for the troops trying to break their way in through the back.

"What are we waiting for?" an Elite growled nervously.

The army should be starting their next Assault-

Suddenly the a massive barrage of Artillery reached their ears.

"That's the signal!" yelled Ahsoka. The more Will had been around her the more surprised he was at the maturity of a 16 year old General. Originally he had his doubts about the capability she had but was now gradually erasing them.

"Charge!" roared one of the Rangers.

Will jumped up with the MA5D clutched in his grasp. And took point with the Jedi igniting their lightsabers. They jumped over the edge

of the hillside followed by the Clone Troopers and the Spartans followed by everyone else. The Rangers to his right took a running start and ignited their trademark jetpacks and then stopped allowing for a dramatic fall.

The group let out a general war cry leaping over the edge and then sprinting down the hill.

There were a few guards manning the rear of the center. Will sprinted down and arming a grenade, threw it into the droids below. Running out to meet them were various other aliens, mercenaries, from what Sara was saying. They took up positions and started firing with their own weapons. They were promptly silenced by gunfire from the Rangers as they touched down all around them. The two sides were clashing now everywhere. William leaped over a Weequay kicking it as it did so moving forward firing his weapon as he did so.

A Twi'lek collapsed color blossoming on his attire. He switched to another target and eliminated that sprinting past their falling bodies.

"Push for the control center!" yelled Anakin next to him, deflecting blasters back at the defenders.

The Republic put on a show this time as a group of Fifty or so B2's appeared. They stopped and crouched firing their weapons. The Barks of DC-15's stopped as they eliminated the droids.

That threat eliminated they entered the main base and saw a series of steps leading up to their destination.

"Spartans, move up and secure the top with Rex, we'll take the outside forces!" yelled Anakin as the troops streamed past. Will charged up killing an Ithorian with a burst from his rifle. He cleared the top stair diving for the ground as a group of Weequay's opened up with weapons. Behind him Chelsea's shotgun roared as it found its mark. The soldiers at the top struggled to comprehend who this new attacker was. The rest retreated when they saw the Clones.

Will came up from his roll and lunged at the nearest alien plowing into it and pinning it to the ground. The attacker struggled to grasp at him but his shields made it as slippery as oil. He connected a fist and shot once with his gun. His shields flared and William slapped the blaster out of his hand before disabling the alien.

"Where is all the comm data stored!" he asked the terrified Alien.

"No...idea, who are you...guys!" he said trying to struggle free.

"I said, where is the data!" William said louder unsheathing the knife strapped to his shoulder, behind him Captain Rex and another two squads ran down the stairs after the retreating defenders.

It paled when it caught sight of the blade.

"Over there, left side you s\*\*\*\*." William let him go only to be restrained by Chelsea. He walked over and taking Sarah's chip placed

it against the computer transferring her to it.

"Good news Sarah?"

\_"Scanning right now, it looks as though the station identified a transmission of unknown origin, we can analyze all data later. We should be moving. They've recently called for reinforcements and they should arrive in another few hours."  
><em>

"Thank you Sara." William said transferring her back and into his helmet again.

"Right, we're done here! Let's move out and help the others."

As it turned out they didn't need any help. The surprise of the armies entrance to caused the majority of the defenders, (mercenaries in fact) to surrender immediately. They were rounded up and sent back up to Republic ships to await processing.

When the word had been spread that reinforcements were due soon it had been decided that the Sangheili would glass the critical areas of the planet and then retreat to Coruscant. As Will watched the Battlecruisers and a few Carriers begin to descend Ahsoka came up to him.

"Excuse me, I don't get one thing."

"What don't you get?"

"This whole concept of glassing. I only heard it mentioned offhandedly-" she yelled as a loud crack filled the air as the Carrier some distance away opened up with its energy projector bleeding forth a solid beam of plasma that tore through the air and vaporized the Earth underneath. Thunder crackled and lightning flashed as it burned away at a dense concentration of buildings. It moved overhead and when it was done Ahsoka saw nothing but a molten mass of white hot metal. Then the heat wave hit them followed a by a wave of dust.

"Did that explain?"

Ahsoka nodded mutely somewhat shocked.

The Republic troops were having similar reactions as they all waited for pickup via Gunship. Lots of curses were traded as they watched the Sangheili ships cauterize the planet's surface. They had similar reactions of shock, awe, and fear.

William noted an uneasiness forming in the ranks of the clones. It didn't sit well with him, in fact, even since their first introduction there had been a stark difference in attitude between the two factions. He had noticed the UNSC oodling over them, almost worshipfully in some cases, the Republic it had seemed was uncomfortable with the idea and way this 'Allied Species' fought. It was deemed "archaic, aged, and not very effective". In some of the conversations he had heard they had referred to them as "barbarians." The Sangheili were no better, talking scathingly behind their backs about the dishonor of being a clone.

In short it didn't brood well. It was still there when he and other personal boarded a Pelican bound for the Dauntless which had returned during the fight with reinforcement ships from the UNSC. He was troubled by it. It was to be expected of course, after all the Republic's military had only just been recently introduced, how were they to know how to respond. He was particularly concerned by the Sangheili's response. He had seen in the course of the Great War what lengths they took to do things "honorably". It was a bad combination that threatened disaster given the Sangheili's pride and the Republic's scathing opinion of the UNSC, or any of the other races in fact.

It was still bothering him when the Pelican touched down in the Dauntless's largest hangar. He proceeded with Chelsea to the Spartan Deck, (still sparse and unfinished) and removed his Generation One armor from his body to be repaired and made ready for instantaneous use. After being debriefed by the replacing Captain, (who had taken charge after Will had been released from duties) and an ONI officer on the data retrieved from the comm outpost. He made his way to his quarters, and then to the Observation deck.

They had transitioned to slipspace by now en route to Galactic City. Several of the Allied Species counselors had accompanied the Dauntless and were meeting with the Galactic Senate to negotiate a treaty of alliance, or something to that effect. William noted as he scrolled through a datapad with the official briefing of deployment for what was being called the "Andromeda Fleet" that the Arbiter was accompanying in one of the Supercarriers that had arrived (it had been on the otherside of the planet conducting glassing operations) That was sure to provoke a reaction from the Republic, it wouldn't be a positive one either.

"Hello."

His thoughts were interrupted by Ripa who had approached him.

He didn't answer.

"Are you well brother?"

He sat in silence for another minute.

"Yeah. How was action in space?"

"Interesting. The Republic has some interesting ideas on its opinions of us.

"I noticed." Will said dryly. "In fact I was just thinking about that. You would think they would have thanked us for assistance or something."

"Their technology certainly impresses. I think the Sangheili do a wonderfully job just without laser based weaponry." ignoring him.

"What do you think of their mass cloning usage."

"Unacceptable. However dire their situation was or is, to breed that many clones that quickly is not honorable, to make an entire army and use them like we did with Unngoy, dishonorable."



"Which is another point. How did they create an army that fast, to create the same army now takes more time than it did for the first group that saw action."

"An excellent point indeed." A lot of things remain under cover of darkness.

"How then do we expose them to light?"

Ripa laughed. "An excellent point as well!" his face fell though. "How was your encounter with this...Sith."

"Horrible, there were too many things we didn't count on. It was textbook until we were surprised Ventress. She killed and subsequently angered a lot of solders today. I'm still astonished we even let her get away!"

They sat for another moment.

"If we enter system within a few hours let me know, I need to rest. I haven't done so properly since before Rhen Var." said Ripa.

"May honor follow you." said Will in Ripa's native Sangheili echoing a phrase used for parting.

Then he was alone with his thoughts again.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Allright another chapter done. Ventress escapes, we learn a little more of Dean's perspective's on things, he loses a squad member, <em>

\_(\*\*Authors note: \*\*I don't like killing characters but it serves a purpose later) \_

\_William was demoted from his previous position of Commander? What? More to come on this later. What do you guys think? How was he demoted? We have a mini action moment, with the Comm outpost and then we have...\_

\_Tensions.\_

\_This chapter starts to begin to explore some of the \_\_basic differences between the two sides which many of you pointed out. You truly are amazing. It was really fun to start to address this on a basic level. You'll have to wait to see where this all goes. They're going to Coruscant right? \*Winks\*\_

\_Read and review is all I ask of you. Thanks to those who PM'd suggestions. Who knows, I might incorporate your idea.\_

\_Cheers,\_

\_ yours in writing\_

\*\*\_theotherpianist\_\*\*

## 9. Chapter 9

\_Hey fanfiction world, I would like to offer an apology for my failure to update. To make it up I wrote an extra long chapter, 12,000 words in fact, I hope this makes up for the fact that I had a bunch of Finals in school to take. \_

\_For sake of time I'll do reviews next time around.

><em>

\_\*\*IMPORTANT: I'm taking submissions for characters you'd like to include in someway, shape or form. William's brothers do not have official names. Would you like to pick a name? PM your suggestion. Otherwise they stay the same as they have been.\*\*\_

\_\*\*For the moment I have eliminated my calendar of events until I can clear up errors with it in Chapter One\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter Nine:<p>

\*\*Dauntless Class Battleship (DBD-312): UNSC Dauntless\*\*

\*\*Coruscant System, (slipspace transition) \*\*

\*\*Andromeda Galaxy, \*\*

\*\*10:23:50 hours UNSC STANDARD TIME, December 5th 2559\*\*

\*\*Spartan William Gunther:\*\*

Will was standing on the observation deck with everyone else on the Dauntless waiting for the ship to transition out of slipspace. They had made a detour to pick up more supplies for a more prolonged engagement and were consequently slightly late. The UNSC had already established orbit of some of its vessels in the Upper atmosphere of Coruscant.

Ten seconds passed and suddenly the world reverted into realspace again. Ahead lay the glowing planet of Coruscant, strangely beautiful and mesmerizing characterized by orange, yellow, and red lines from civilian air traffic. . Glowing on the dark side of the planet was Galactic City, a massive Ecumenopolis that covered the entire planet that was home to over a trillion citizens. That number alone boggled William. Seeing it in person proved that number to him.

His thoughts and impressions were echoed by the rest of the crew and compliment on the same and other decks. It was truly a sight that, William hated to admit, awed him. The ship tilted right and began entering orbit. A Republic squad of ARC-170's flew by. A Venator joined in escorting the ship. It was really odd to see the Republic, while militarily supreme have ships the size of Halcyon class Cruisers and the like. The Dauntless was joined by three of the smaller ships as escorts. Below a thump was heard and the two Paris class Heavy Frigates Yorktown and Saratoga launched joining the rest of the fleet now assembled. As William watched the ship settle he noticed the huge hulking shape of a CSO class Supercarrier "below".

"It's casting it's own freaking shadow!" \_William laughed to himself. The enormous 29 kilometer ship absolutely dwarfed its Republic escorts, and indeed was casting a shadow on the planet. Surrounding them were the much smaller Carriers like the \_Shadow of Intent. \_William watched as the ship suddenly leveled out and orbited alongside the UNSC Infinity.

"It would appear what the Republic has in numbers we have in size." said Ripa 'Talam joining him.

"The poor souls probably are more terrified of the Supercarrier than anything else." Will said.

The two laughed at the joke and watched as they orbited the planet before the ship turned one more time to angle itself better and there in the corner William caught sight of the Home Fleet.

"Daaaang that's big!" said a Marine from in front.

Another whistled and others immediately responded with remarks of the same type. There in the corner were over three hundred warships, mostly Venator class. It was another show to William of the massive power the Republic fielded.

"You know, it was probably wise to bring the biggest ships we own here, especially the Supercarrier, I think that alone would guarantee anybody rethinking their opinion on us." said Will.

"Size makes a difference." Ripa agreed.

"Would the landing party delegation please report to the hangar." \_Sarah said over the PA system, she had once again let her subroutines run the ship and was helping the dumb AI onboard function.

"That would be our cue." said William.

He and Ripa walked to the Hangar where two Pelicans with Chelsea and a squad of Marines aboard waited. They boarded with a couple of the Covenant Separatist troops stationed on board and were flown out into the blazing day skies of Coruscant.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Terthi Astronomical Laboratory and Science Center<strong>

\*\*Lower levels of Coruscant \*\*

\*\*One day ago:  
><strong>

Dr. Vindi Yallat looked up from a datapad as she approached a Security checkpoint. She was due for an important meeting with a delegation of Scientists, Intelligence Officers, and a group of people from a group called the UNSC that had just entered in system on a small ship called a 'Prowler' before requesting help in grasping astronomical data they had collected. They were being really quiet about it, she was used to working with Agents of the Intelligence

variety but the level to which they upheld their secrecy was far more than she had ever seen.

The Bivalan looked up and suddenly gasped as the huge shape of an enormous ship with a massive hook like prow appeared. The very fact that it was visible sent chills up her spine. The Home fleet only appeared at night reflected by the light of the Sun, the fact that this ship appeared visible from the distance it was at was a fact that she struggled to comprehend the size of the ship.

Far above her the sky was suddenly filled with the honks and blares of air traffic above. Her guards looked up as well above them was a scene of descending chaos. Citizenry and police struggled to comprehend who the new visitors were, the skies were a mess and a pileup was happening mid-air.

"Who the heck is that?" she questioned aloud as the Doctor and her escort stopped to stare dumbstruck.

"That would be the Sangheili." said an unfamiliar voice.

She looked down to stare at another in a light black armor with a helmet held at her side. Dr. Yallat's entourage immediately aimed there DC-15's at the newcomer who was flanked by a squad of Soldiers who stood at ease.

"Who are you?" she asked, "How do you know about...these Sangheili?" behind her the Clone Troopers escorting her lowered their weapons.

"Agent Veronica Dare, UNSC Office of Naval Intelligence." she said.

"Wait? You are human!? But-"

"You are Doctor Yallat correct?" Dare asked cutting her off.

"Why...yes," she said still trying to recover. "it's just-"

"We can talk later about that, to answer your question the Sangheili made a show of force by showing off a 29 Kilometer Supercarrier." she said slightly smug.

"Bu-but how?" she asked. "No ship can be that-"

"Doctor are you going to show us the lab so that we can analyze yes or no?"

"Yes, it's just around the corner." she said pointing at an intersection in the large darkened streets of the Lower City.

She started forward with her still as of yet silent Clone Escorts.

They turned the corner and a dozen members of the Coruscant Guard in their trademark red and white armor stood guard at a heavily secured door.

"Halt." said the lead trooper with a Captain's identification

marks.

They did so.

"Dr. Yallat?" one of them asked.

"Yes, with Agent Dare from the UNSC and a..." she paused not sure of what to call the troops surrounding the ONI agent.

"...protection detail for the data recovered." finished Agent Dare.

"You have been expected. Welcome to the Lab." said the Sergeant. The door hissed open and he waved them through.

The group entered and they were greeted by a older human scientist with graying strands of hair and a white labcoat.

"My my...so the rumors are true. Humans from another galaxy! This completely revolutionizes everything we the Scientific Community believed in... Ah! Dr Yallat welcome!" he shook Dr. Vindi's hand and then Agent Dare's hand.

"I'm Dr. Auris caretaker and head of this lab. You have data for us to look at Agent Dare?"

"Yes Doctor, I was charged with figuring out where the distress signals have been coming from in your galaxy. What we were able to do with the astrographical data we were provided was not enough."

"Very well, we're due for a meeting to below to brief the other heads of the military and the Jedi Council on the situation with the data."

They turned right and stopped at a security checkpoint with automated defenses and another trio of Clones.

"I apologize." Doctor Auris said, "due to the sensitive nature of this facility because of the amount of sensitive classified data that's not held anywhere else we're going to spend a lot of time through Security."

Forty minutes later and after eight separate checks they were all allowed into a large glass paneled elevator that descended a quarter klick before stopping.

"Right this way please." the elderly doctor said as the doors opened.

The followed him out into a narrow hallway where one final intensive search brought them into a conference room with a large table with many people seated. Dare's security detail was ushered to the side for final clearance while the Agent and Doctor Vindi proceeded inside.

All eyes fastened on the duo.

Dr. Auris cleared his throat and introduced Dr. Vindi to the assembled group which included some people she had to opportunity to work with before, namely prominent Jedi Master Mace Windu, Admiral

Wilhuff Tarkin, and other's important in the world of Republic Intelligence and Science.

"Right then. I'd like to formally thank everybody for coming today." Dr. Vindi said in welcome. "Today we're here to help an alien power in a mission to figure out where calls of distress have originated from in this galaxy. Now I know some of those here have dissenting opinions but we are here because the Chancellor has asked us in good faith to help the Allied Species, particularly the UNSC, one of the key members. On request the UNSC sent one of it's top field agent's to deliver this data and leave it up to us to solve this mystery."

"Dr. Yallat." the voice of Mace Windu from the side of the table spoke up.

"Yes Master Jedi?"

"Can we go over the reason why the UNSC has asked for help? Some of us haven't bothered to pay attention to events of the past week and if the Republic is going to be part of this it might be good for some to be enlightened."

"Certainly. Agent Dare?" Vindi pointed to the ONI agent and she stood up and took her place.

"To sum up it up briefly this is the entire reason why we ended up here in your galaxy, taking part in a war the Higher Ups are not keen on fighting."

"And that is?" asked Tarkin arrogantly.

"We have substantial evidence to believe that two Military vessels belonging to us have crashed somewhere in this galaxy. Normally this wouldn't be considered a priority except for the fact that we have strong reason to believe at least one of the ships has been missing for almost thirty years now and is carrying a sizeable amount of UNSC material."

"So how come we haven't heard from them before?" asked Master Windu.

"That is part of the mystery. When we received the signals they were clear and readable for almost one second before it fell apart into static. This static is synonymous with the interference received by jamming, just on a much higher level that scrambled it on an incredible scale."

"What do you mean?" asked a Scientist.

"For the signal to become clear enough to hear in the beginning it had to travel almost the estimated length of your galaxy across."

"But that's impossible! Nothing is that powerful! It can't be!" exclaimed another person at the table.

"So you mean to tell that someone's been jamming them? Were you able to pinpoint a location? And how did you decide on the recently destroyed Separatist planet as a good place to look for data?" asked

Mace Windu again.

"Frankly we didn't; we gambled that Alpha One being near the end of the galaxy might have picked up on the transmission to a degree that we did in our galaxy. We were lucky that when we had an AI match the frequency modulation and patterns to anything remotely similar to what we received back home that we found the signal again."

"So why couldn't you trace it?"

Dr. Vindi spoke up again. "That is another problem. Not only were the signals heavily encrypted and distorted but the signal itself was being rearranged and broken apart with parts of it lightyears from another section. It was being actively split."

"How could you do such a thing? We don't have that kind of capability, nobody does!"

"...and that's where you are wrong." Dare spoke up again.

The room fell silent.

"Wait, what do you mean?" asked Dr. Vindi confused suddenly.

"Who?" asked Tarkin incredulously.

"Forerunners." Dare said.

The room got eerily quiet again.

"Hang on. What is this Forerunners?" asked Master Windu.

"And that my good Jedi is precisely why we are still here caring so much about this whole affair." said Agent Dare with a slight smirk.

Dr. Vindi's brain suddenly hurt as she struggled to comprehend this new information.

"The Forerunners, for all of you who haven't heard, were a race and civilization that was a tier one class society. They held immense technological and military power in the Universe. What we do know about them is approximately 100,000 years ago they were at war with a Parasite."

"And what do we care about a Parasite!?" asked Tarkin contemptuously.

"Let me make one thing clear Admiral. This is no ordinary lifeform. This was a plague of galactic proportions. It's the dead reanimated with a sole purpose to infect more and more life." Dare said suddenly very tensely.

"I don't get it. Why does this war \_matter\_?"

"It matters because during that time they created a series of weapons known as 'Halos'. They had the power to destroy life as we knew it and faced with no other options they fired the array and within an instant life was destroyed in the galaxy. In light of your sharing knowledge of midichlorians we now theorize the Halo event killed all

of them in an instant ending all force-capable life should that have been possible."

"I don't understand..." asked Doctor Vindi. "How are you still around if life ended."

"We believe that the Forerunners faced with their activation of the Halo array scrambled to index as much life as possible. In the aftermath of the ray firing they reseeded the galaxy and we are here, our civilization regressed to tier seven status and for the last ten thousand years we've worked to reattain our status."

Dare heard someone whisper \_"excuses..." \_under their breath. She frowned and turned to a Rodian scientist that turned to talk to her.

"So why is this important to the Republic then?" asked a scientist.

"It's simple!" said Tarkin suddenly in a much better mood. If there is in fact Forerunner artifacts in our galaxy then the Republic has much to benefit from this technologically, militarily, we could crush the Separatist's."

"Exactly." said Dare relieved that they were starting to see the importance of the data held on the file disk in her hand.

The room became eagerly excited all with the exception of Master Windu. Dr. Yallat noted an intense look of concentration on his face. The only time she had seen him like this was when he was "feeling for the shatterpoints" through the force. He looked up.

"It would seem Doctor that we should begin work." he said finally. "I will relay this to the rest of the council."

"My thoughts exactly."

\* \* \*

><p><strong><strong><strong>(Next day) <strong>\*\*\*\*

\*\*10:40 Hours

><strong>

\*\*Spartan William\*\*

\_"Man, I've never seen this much sky traffic!" \_said their pilot from the front when they had descended through atmosphere. he lowered the viewport on the rear of the Pelican so that they could see. True to his words there were vessels of every kind everywhere. He spoke up a moment or two later.

\_"Ok, I'm dropping you all off on the landing pad of the temporary Allied Species embassy in the Senatorial district of Galactic City, Heck, everywhere is Galactic City. It's currently 89 degrees outside and weather's not too bad. Thanks for flying Air UNSC and have a nice day!" \_quipped their Pilot.

They all said a word of thanks as it touched down and opened its hatch. William suddenly felt dwarfed as he stepped off the Pelican



and immersed himself into Galactic City. It felt like being in New York or even New Alexandria for that matter. Everywhere the size of the skyline dwarfed anything else.

"Excuse me, are you all part of the delegation Security detail?" asked an ODS'T who had just walked up to them.

"They are but Ripa and I are supposed to be part of the Senatorial security detail." answered William.

"If I could just point you over there, the Councilor's are just getting ready to leave for their debut session in the Senate today."

"Thanks Jumper." said William. The two walked over to another larger group of military personal. Among them were a number of Spartan IV's, Sangheili Special Operations Soldiers, Sangheili Ultras, and Alex's squad of ODS'T's and, he was surprised to see his other brother Tyler there.

"\_Since when did he get here?" \_thought Will.

"Ah, demon, you have all your brother's here now." the Sangheili had the nerve to give him a wolfish grin.

"Thanks." said Will but it was sarcastic at best. The two didn't notice the Spartan and were conversing about whatever. He was relieved to see the two didn't look so bad. A CO suddenly ordered them inside the building and they all complied.

"Spartans!" said a female Spartan wearing white Scout armor trimmed with red accents. Her helmet was off and her reddish brown hair flowed back in a short military regulation ponytail gesturing to William and then Chelsea as she came up alongside him.

"Yes ma'am?" he said recognizing a superior officer's tone of voice.

"I'm Commander Palmer, I asked that the two of you help protect the Councilor's should anyone decide to play anything funny.

The two stopped and saluted. They were both taller but this Spartan IV had the persona of someone much larger.

"As you were Spartans, you are?"

"Spartan William Gunther, former leader of Section Three Special Warfare Team Castle..." he replied to her question standing as tall as he could with out being intimidating.

"...and Chelsea Baker of the same time."

"Where's the rest of your unit?"

"MIA, presumed dead." said William.

Satisfied with this evaluation she pointed to the other Spartans,

"This here is Fireteam Majestic, you'll be joining with them for the

time being until I say otherwise, now introduce yourselves please."

"Sure, I'm DeMarco, Team Leader." said a bald blue haired man in the Soldier Variant of the Spartan IV armor.

"Madsen." said a younger blonde Spartan with blue eyes in Recon armor.

"Hi, I'm Tedra Grant." said an Irish Spartan with red hair and verdant green eyes in the Pathfinder variant.

"Hoya." boomed a massive man with an Asmaran accent, he was wearing the Operator model of MJOLNIR.

"The name's Thorne, nice to meet you." said another Spartan wearing the standard Recruit model.

He was the only one to actually shake hands. A fact that was not lost upon Palmer who gave the rest of the team a sideways glance.

"Right then," said Palmer not missing a beat, "we are due to escort some of the Councilor's any moment now. That means we are to be in the Senate building for the \_entire\_ galaxy to see. Under no circumstances will I tolerate any behavior not worthy of Spartan's at any point..."

\_ "She reminds me of Colonel Holland." \_William said privately to Chelsea.

\_ "Agreed. She's definitely a no-nonsense individual." \_

\_ "Isn't she supposed to be in charge of all the Spartans on Infinity?" \_

\_ "Yup." \_

"...am I understood Spartans?"

"Yes ma'am!" they all chorused.

\_ "She strikes me as the person who doesn't tolerate failure at all." \_said Sarah to William.

\_ "You've been quiet." \_he responded

\_ "I've been watching, listening, drinking in everything useful since I've been in touch with the local data stream. You'll like this one, the Supercarrier has supposedly been the cause for an estimated 1,500,00 non-lethal traffic accidents and emergency calls to the Senate and Coruscant Guard and that's in this small section of the planet. Public opinion of the Allied Species arriving has been everything from extreme terror, to extreme anger.\_

\_ "You would've thought our advance party message would've done something..." \_ Will said to himself.

\_ "Shall I bring you up the most interesting news articles?" \_

\_ "Not right now." \_William replied as the Councilor's suddenly

emerged through a door swarmed by an immense hoard of aliens, all of them the press or paparazzi. They were surrounded by the Coruscant Guard in royal blue and flanked them all the way to the immense Speeder that had just landed. Half of the protection detail and the Councilor's stepped on. William caught the eye of Arbiter Thel 'Vadam who gave an almost imperceptible nod before stepping onboard, his runic armor covered by a Doarmirian Cloak.

Ripa stepped forward with the rest of the Sangheili detail and stepped in protective formation. Several Honor Guards brought up the rear. Next came the Human delegates. He noticed Captain Thomas Lasky as he walked past. He gave a nod to Sarah and the Spartans (with Majestic helmeted again) spread out and formed a wall for the Human Councilor's consisting of one or two Admirals, Lord Terrence Hood, the new Head of ONI Serin Osman, and several other diplomats and ambassadors.

\_"Osman gives me the creeps." \_Chelsea conferred to him privately.

\_"Agreed." \_he winked a signal light over his HUD to hers. She understood the gesture and remained silent.

The last of them passed by and the rest of the Security detail stepped into the now more crowded speeder. At that point the doors closed and William took watched as a flight of MP Gunships flew up to escort them.

\_"All this for us?" \_he asked Ripa over a private channel.

\_"It makes sense, the public is in commotion over us arriving, I don't understand why we must, to use a human phrase, put all of your eggs in a basket."\_

\_"Well we better hope it does not break."\_

\_"Indeed..."\_

\_"Sarah now you may read the headlines."\_ William said to the AI.

\_"Oh, now you want to talk?" \_she teased.

\_"Not funny Sarah."\_

\_"Ok fine, let's see, mass riots over unexpected visitation, We're not alone! Humans from abroad?, ooh, I like the tabloids. Hmm... how about; Secrets and Lies! What the Chancellor hasn't told us. How long has he known? And..." \_she laughed.

\_"What?" \_

\_"There's 14,000 about Spartans. Want me to read you a few?"\_

\_"Sure."\_

\_"Spartans! Cyborgs or Machines? Is this the newest battle droid?"  
\_

Will actually laughed at that one. His helmet concealed it but he caught himself the second time.

\_"What's so funny?" \_asked Chelsea.

Will proceeded to tell her and elicited the same reaction.

\_"How many about us being a collection of barbarians?"\_

\_"Approximately 500,000 thousand headlines."\_

\_"Great." \_

He was interrupted by the swerving off the vehicles into a "special" traffic lane. There they picked up speed and proceeded to race over the city.

He looked down. They were passing an area with streets. Underneath people stopped what they were doing and crowded their heads upwards to look at the spectacle. He looked down farther and saw a immense drop.

He whistled to himself as he saw part of the extremes in height that were the city.

A few minutes later they passed a glowing advertisement with another headline. The translation software in his helmet which had recently been upgraded to understand "Galactic Basic" and the other major languages of the galaxy described a news special on the events of today at the Senate.

They turned again and William saw their destination which was a massive drum-shaped building boasting a shield-shaped dome with a diameter of more than two kilometers,

Located in the heart of the Senate District, the building was situated at the end of a large, flat concourse. This area was lined with many tall, impressionistic humanoid statues, each representing a founder from each of the Core Worlds. Surrounded by the a large plaza several parks such lay around it.

Adorning the front of the building were two narrow towers. One of these structures contained the Chancellor's office, or Sarah was saying. The summit offered a wide view of the capital. An impressive sight right now.

They began to descend to the top of a large platform right outside the Senate. William realized that it was packed with yet \_more \_people.

\_"Can people just give us a break for once?" \_

\_"Highly unlikely." \_Said Sarah chiming in again.

\_"That was rhetorical." \_Will glowered. \_"I don't like crowds."\_

They descended and slowed on one side they prepared to leave. They "touched" down and William walked out of the open doors and stepped

down from the repulsorlifted platform and out into a much larger group of people. A large cry of excitement erupted as they exited. Cameras rolled, photographs were taken, live interviews were conducted. He and Chelsea flanked out on either side with the rest of the Spartan attachment behind him. The Councilor's stepped out and Lord Hood and the Arbiter stepped forward to meet with a smaller man who he heard one person name as the Chancellor Palpatine.

On the outside he appeared harmless but there was something about him that unsettled him. He reminded him of the holographic images he had seen of dictators like Stalin, Hitler, and others more modernly. He was 5'8" and while immensely shorter than a Spartan like Will, he commanded attention. His eyes, though kindly, had a look that made Will think twice. As a Spartan he had been trained to try and see past the facade of a person and see them for how they truly were and as he looked and stared at the Chancellor he shuddered.

Here was a man to stay away from. Palpatine glanced his direction and made eye contact for moment. Will felt like a spotlight had lit him up from the inside out. This man was reading him like he was a book. Then in a moment it passed from him, almost dreamlike. Will shook this from his head and maintained a watchful eye.

If anybody else shared this feeling of being exposed they hid it as Lord Hood strode up and shook his hand in a firm handshake. The Arbiter then followed suit and cheers and applause rose up from the crowd as cameras caught the historic images.

He returned and said a few words of welcome before turning and leading them towards the Senate building flanked by a duo of Guards carrying pike like instruments that wore blood red garb. The group proceeded with William and Chelsea clutching Battle Rifle's at their sides waiting for something to move unexpectedly. They both walked past the grand doors guarded by a group of Senate Commando's dressed in blue armor clutching DC-15 Rifles.

A duo of Senate Guards then proceeded ahead of the Chancellor. They proceeded down a long hallway filled with the noise of the Senate Arena. The noise became more intense as they proceeded until they filed into the main chamber through the end of the hallway.

The noise suddenly erupted into a loud cheer that thundered throughout a massive two kilometer dome containing Senators and Representatives from every planet. The sheer size of the place stunned Will and the others behind him, there reactions were quickly hidden though. All along the top a walkway traversed the entire way around. Descending to the bottom were rows upon rows of pods containing members of the Senate. He noticed Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan sitting with another larger group of what he assumed were Jedi all dressed simply in their robes.

The small bouts of cheering and applause he quickly realized was meant for the Chancellor as he walked onto a ramp and then entered into a pod that ascended from its platform to the center of the convocation center. He waved and smiled and the Senate returned it with applause.

Will suspected normally the Senate didn't cheer quite as loudly as it did on this occasion, that it was more of a show to the foreigners. Whatever the reason they were all gestured to two pods that were

waiting to be boarded by one of the Senate Guards. As the Chancellor took his place the Senate started another wave of applause for the newcomers.

He stepped on and the rest of the Human delegation filed on. The Sangheili filled the other one and both proceeded to a position off to the side. On a screen they could see the procession of the entire Senate.

"Welcome," he paused. His kindly and warm voice filling the hall amplified by the Speakers in his pod.

"Welcome, Senators, Jedi of the Council, and of course welcome â€" to our mutual friends in arms in the struggles against the Separatists' for which we have labored so \_long\_ to end!" he shook his fist to emphasize his point.

"It is my humble desire that we, the Republic, welcomes you with open arms and \_embrace\_ you as our brothers and sisters! We should not consider them the sons and daughters of scoundrels, of pirates, brutes, or barbarians but as our equals and part of our illustrious society!"

Will frowned at that line. It only reinforced his uneasiness of the Chancellor.

More applause and cheers went out.

"But most importantly we are here today to recognize the existence of life beyond our galaxy! A feat which many including myself were doubtful of! Today we welcome the Human race and their Sangheili allies as friends of the Republic!"

The Senate Arena was filled with more cheers and applause. Palpatine silenced them and they quieted. He paused dramatically.

"However, my friends, my fellow Senators, to every citizen and soldier listening in on today's broadcast, today it is my supreme duty to formalize our union as Civilizations in our mutual fight against an aggressor that has wronged you soâ€|terribly and caused the deaths of your valiant soldiers."

\_"He certainly has a way of working the crowd." \_Will said to Ripa.

He looked over and nodded once.

"â€|an enemy," he continued, "which was once considered our own. But their ownâ€|selfish greed and ambition blinded them to the very ideals which we and the Allied Species have sought for since our formations for peace. But in the midst of their pursuit of peace they were dragged into this war, not of their own choice, but that of the Confederacy who so arrogantly, and mercilessly destroyed one of their Carriers, one that was inhabited by thousands of individuals with their own conscious, freedom, and identity and proceeded to try and \_exterminate \_them!"

As he finished with a yell, an uproar of agreement filled the Senate.

"But through great trial and struggle they pushed through and emerged victorious! They have since proved themselves by attacking with our forces a planet vital to the Separatist war effort and \_utterly\_ crushed it!"

A louder cheer and round of applause filled.

"â€|and to show the Confederacy that the galaxy was wrong to deal with a so called "barbaric" race they \_burned \_the surface until it became glass! A monument, a testament to the power they possess, a power which triumphed over the Confederacy!"

\_"He possesses great skill in oration." \_Replied Ripa to William.

"We have asked the Allied Species, specifically their head of Military to tell us their story, to show us how life beyond our galaxy existed. Please welcome Lord Terrence Hood." Said Palpatine finishing soundly.

Roars of applause greeted the aging Head of the UNSC. The pod William was in moved upwards and took the same place that the Chancellor had occupied.

As it finished a light lit up the platform and he began to speak.

"Now, I'm not one for displays of oratory like your Chancellor here,"

Some laughs broke out at that comment.

"â€|but I will do the best I can. I am Lord Hood, and I represent the United Nations Space Command, the military element of our government, the UEG. Our story used to be one filled with war. From the beginning our accounts show an exorbitant, even shameful amount of war that stains the pages of our progress. But that was put behind us centuries ago when we finally turned our attention to the stars and within decades had broken past the limits of our home planet and began to expand. But within that expansion the old ideas of power, greed, and oppression began to take place, thus in that conflict forming what we know as the UNSC."

He paused and cleared his throat.

"But finally we forget those problems and society progressed in leaps and bounds far beyond what we had done before. It was a Golden Age for the Human race until we were suddenly plunged headlong into a genocidal war with a Hegemony of different races known as the Covenant. The Covenant believed it was their duty to exterminate Humanity, this task was carried out, mostly, by the Sangheili." He gestured to the other pod containing the Arbiter and others.

"We were then hurled headfirst into a war that lasted decades, one by one our world's fell, burned like the Confederate planet we burned. The war forced the human race to change, to adapt, to think. Out of it our greatest weapons and ideas were born. It was only when the Covenant realized the truth about their beliefs that the war tipped in our favor. The Sangheili allied with us and we were able to defeat the Covenant and ensure our survival.

And nowâ€¦today we wish to stand by you as allies, to ensure that those who have decided aggression is the answer are re-corrected in their belief that we may have peace and return to our lives. Thank you."

\_"The man is always to the point." \_chimed Sarah.

Another roll of applause echoed throughout the two kilometer dome as the pod settled down again.

"Thank you, thank you." Said Palpatine as the pod rose up again.  
"Thank you Lord Hood, for your remarks."

"I would like to put forth a movement." came the voice of Senator Padme Amidala as the Chancellor finished rising to the middle.

"The Senate recognizes Senator Amidala from Naboo." Said a blue skinned alien next to him.

"I move that as of today the Allied Species and the Republic enter into a state of alliance..."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Fleetmaster Rtas' Vadum<strong>

\*\*CSO Class Supercarrier Divine Retribution\*\*

\*\*Coruscant Geo-synchronous Orbit above Senatorial District  
\*\*

\*\*11:54 Hours UNSC Standard Military Time\*\*

The massive hangar of the Supercarrier hummed quietly as the Coruscant Surface glowed with activity below. He was currently seeking to converse with a newly appointed Fleetmaster, a Sangheili that had served as a Shipmaster that had fought the Confederacy in the Battle of Rhen Var. Rtas had recently left the Shadow of Intent and had left it parked inside the massive belly of the Supercarrier and was due to take command of it.

He was amused by reports of the reactions to the fleet appearing and the sheer size of the Supercarrier, something that had never been seen before on that scale in this galaxy.

\_"As well as they should fear us..." \_he thought as he walked towards the bridge.

He walked past a duo of Banshee's being fueled up and then entered inside a massive hallway as a lance of grunts saluted him before entering one of the Supercarriers massive corridors. The carrier was large enough it required a system of teleportation pulled from Forerunner artifacts to quickly transport individuals around. He preferred to walk however walking a good kilometer before entering a small elevator that could take him straight to the bridge.

He stepped off and found himself in the cavernous den that was the Bridge. The Holographic panels all around the top showed an impressive panoramic view of the planet and the fleet. The bridge was



buried in the center of the ship towards the rear and therefore protected by everything else above it and below it.

He watched with interest the various members working idly chatting or working together with the other ships serving as head of logistics and coordinating the needs of a fleet the size of the current one with more Human ships arriving in a few hours. A normal carrier was crewed by at least four thousand, if not more. The Divine Retribution was crewed by no less than 6000 crew members, the extra number needed to be able to carry on other duties needed by this fleet. Half of which were on board the kilometer wide bridge. He walked to the front of it and greeted the temporary commander before relieving him of duty.

"Status Report!" he barked.

One by one comments and details flowed fluidly and like clockwork.

"Engineering 100%"

"reactors are optimal..."

"Life Support is good, methane levels for the grunts are normal..."

...and so on until they finished.

"Any word on Fleetmaster 'Katar?" he asked clacking his mandibles.

"He's currently off duty resting right now." said someone off to the side.

"Wake him in half an hour. I want to speak with him."

"doing so..."

"Fleetmaster 'Vadum. Rest of the fleet due in three hours."

"Thank you, carry on." he said distractedly.

He turned his attention to a life video feed of the proceedings on Coruscant. He watched as news coverage showcased the Arbiter and others stepping off transports and shaking hands with the Chancellor. He watched for a few minutes as the Chancellor started speaking inside the Senate that he was interrupted.

"Fleetmaster, some of our fleet is breaking off the main group! They're not responding to hails!"

"What? How many, what class?"

"at least dozen CRS Light Cruisers with four CCS class leading them!" yelled the same Elite.

"Charge weaponry and post a general notice! Contact the Republic and advise them on the situation. Find out what's going on in that group!" he ordered. Rtas suddenly had a bad feeling as they started descending towards the Senatorial District. Several of the Republic

ships now following them.

"They're launching fighters and dropships!" yelled out someone else.

"What is this madness? Launch boarding parties and order them to seize control, Weapons? Do we have a shot at their engines?"

"No! not without risking damage to the planet!"

Rtas swore.

\* \* \*

><p><em>"Attention all Allied Species," <em>Sarah said over the battle-net. \_"Four of our Battlecruisers moving to the surface of the planet with multiple CRS Light cruisers. Can anyone confirm their orders?" \_Sarah interrupted over the Battle-Net/

The Senate erupted into applause and cheering again as the Chancellor said something about restoring peace with a newly formed alliance with the Allied Species.

\_"No." \_Said a Sangheili Fleetmaster. \_"No communications attempts are successful, we are alerting the Coruscant Guard now-"

Suddenly the power dimmed plunging the Arena almost into darkness. Screams and shouts erupted at the suddenness of the action Will found communications cut off for a moment.

"Everyone remain calm!" The Chancellor somehow managed to yell over the din as Senate Commandos burst in to see what happened.

The Jedi assembled below on the floor ignited their lightsabers and sprung to assist as an alarm blared and emergency lighting flared to light.

Suddenly the power flickered back on as well as Communications.

\_"Someone want to tell me what the h\*\*\* just happened?" \_asked Palmer over a flurry of different voices asking the same thing.

\_"This is Three Charlie Alpha! It's the Storm! They're deploying en masse in the Senatorial District! We need back-GAH!" \_a Marine cried out and fell silent. Suddenly an explosion tore through the roof on an unoccupied side of the Senate Arena. A Type 54 Mass Deployment Carapace punched through the roof and settle down. a dozen Elites and the rest grunts burst out and started firing at the Senate Commandos who returned fire instantly.

"Spartans! Clear the area of Storm and let's evacuate the Senate! The rest of you! Escort the Senators!" yelled Palmer at the ODST's and Ranger's in a separate pod. She ran unholstering two M6 Magnums and firing them in tandem taking down a duo of grunts.

The non-Spartans ran towards the exit to a redoubt underneath that had lit up in red light. The laid down protective fire while the Senate was evacuated.

"Majestic! Move up and secure the Chancellor! Castle with me!" yelled Palmer over an explosion as their pod settled back down at the base. They quickly disembarked and ran up the other end of a long ramp where they took down a couple of Elite's that roared at them. Will fired a burst catching an unshielded Elite in the face before having it fall to the ground motionless.

Majestic ran to the left and jumped off a balcony covering the Chancellor as he made his way with a couple Red Guards as company firing as they went another two Elite's toppled off the edge and plunged to the bottom where they broke their necks.

The Storm began returning fire having caught their bearings. One Zealot opened up with a portable plasma cannon he was wielding forcing Palmer, Chelsea, and Will to duck to avoid the storm of heated energy streaming past them.

Will unhooked a grenade and then chucked it at the approximate location. A clap of thunder met his ears and rolled out of cover firing on full automatic catching it with its shields down. He turned its attention and Will rolled out of the way firing at a grunt toting a Fuel Rod Cannon. It collapsed twitching as a stream of depleted uranium caught its head.

"Majestic, we need some fire on this Split-Chin!" yelled Palmer. A second later a crack from Madsen's SRS99-S5 silenced the noise of battle for a moment.

The plasma fire instantly stopped and all three Spartans rolled out and began firing on the remainder of the troops now just grunts.

They were quickly stopped and the Senate Arena fell empty of fire. Out of the corner of his eye William saw Ripa run with his entourage out the door.

"We've got it here." said one of the Commandos turning to them.

"Right, Spartans we're heading outside to assist." said Palmer.

The group ran forward out onto the Senate plaza which had now become a firefight zone.

They all ducked as a plasma ball from a wraith raced over the top of their head.

The wraith was subsequently destroyed by a volley of rockets from a squad of Marine's that was entrenched behind a prefabricated concrete barrier.

"All personal be advised Senate defenses are online." A Clone broke in on the Battle-Net.

They revealed themselves in the form of AAA turrets that exacted vengeance on three Phantoms trying to land on the plaza.

The turrets turned skywards and went to work and eliminated a light cruiser trying to maneuver into position.

A Phantom made its way through the defenses and promptly dropped a cage that burst open when it hit the ground revealing a...

Will wasn't sure of what to make of it.

He had never seen an alien like this before. It was an extremely Frankensteinian creature. The closest comparison he could use reminded him of the trolls from an old movie he watched a while ago. Something about golden rings. This...troll then possessed a tortoise like shell of armor that covered it. It stood 15ft tall and on its large head possessed a single large eye. Its large and extremely gangly arms possessed two massive razor-like claws on each appendage.

"What the?!" yelled a Marine before the alien gave an enormous roar and swatted it aside with like a rag-doll. The Marine's neck broke instantly and it flew some twenty feet away from the alien.

"What is that thing?" screamed Chelsea losing some of her nerve.

"Sharquoi! It's a Sharquoi!" roared Ripa who had just appeared beside him wielding a Carbine.

The Sharquoi took another step and hurled the ruins of a tank at a Republic Gunship that was providing air support.

The Gunship reared back but it clipped the wing and spiraled to the ground in a ball of flame.

"I got it!" yelled Madsen coming up from behind. He crouched and fired four times with his Sniper. The high velocity rounds had no effect other than bouncing off the armored shell and angering it.

It gave a roar and charged towards the Spartans.

"\*\*\*\*!" yelled Madsen as Majestic broke to find cover. Ripa ignited an energy sword and swiped savagely as it passed. The blade had a marginal effect only leaving a white hot gash that made the enormous Sharquoi \_really\_ angry.

It swiped at Ripa who rolled. The Sharquoi staggered having momentum lost but carried its swipe to crash into Will who had just reloaded after emptying a magazine into its exposed body.

The breath was knocked out of Will and his shields miraculously held but dropping almost instantly down to zero. Lights exploded in his eyes and he flew through the air and towards a squad of Storm advancing on a group of Clones. He pulled out his knife as he fell and using his quarter body with armor as a weapon slammed into the squad with lethal effect. It pulverized a grunt and he came up from to roll with a knife that stabbed into the Storm Elite. It clutched its wound and howled as Will decapitated it with a swing.

The rest of the squad stunned by this method of attacking broke ranks to be cut down by blasterfire.

"Thanks for the assist Spartan!" one of them yelled.

Will looked around for the Sharquoi. It was still running around, and

still very angry.

"This is Spartan Palmer to any available UNSC ship. We have a target elimination priority Alpha-X ray-Charlie! We need an ordinance strike ASAP. The Senate is in danger!" Palmer yelled appearing out of nowhere firing two pistols in tandem.

"Roger Spartan Palmer. Infinity needs it painted. Do so and support granted." \_Said the voice of a Spartan IV handler aboard the Infinity.

"I got it!" said Will pulling out of a side pouch a hand held laser designator.

"Mark it Spartan!"

"It's coming right for us!" a Marine panicked.

They looked up to see the Sharquoi now being helped by a pair of Hunter's with Storm markings in their work of destruction.

"Heads up Phantom!" yelled a Clone with Coruscant Guard markings.

Another standing next to him took out a missile launcher and, with a thump launched its munitions towards it. It hit the rear and succeeded in blowing the rear off completely. It fell towards the ground and crushed a lance of Storm led infantry before they had to jump away because of the Sharquoi that suddenly charged and crossed the gap within a second.

Behind him an Sangheili wielding a Fuel Rod cannon fired twice and then was crushed by the massive claw like appendages.

"Heads up reinforcements!" yelled Hoya who was focusing on the advancing Storm infantry.

Overhead a duo of Pelicans screamed overhead. One providing fire support. It fired its nose mounted gun at the Hunter Pair who roared as they struggled to protect themselves with the shields bonded to its arm.

Will took the opportunity to fire the Battle Rifle's 9.51x1.13 rounds at the Hunter's exposed worm like assemblage.

The Hunter jerked as it registered it was being attacked and injured before it finally collapsed to the ground dead.

Its bond brother suddenly realizing it was dead gave a roar before it was ripped apart by the combined might of the now almost infinite amount of Clone Troopers and a combination of Chelsea's M90 and pinpoint fire from Fireteam Majestic. Thorne suddenly ran up and climbing on the hunters back before taking a knife and slicing through the main nerve of the Hunter.

He leaped off as it roared and tried to smash him with its iconic shieldits body still clinging doggedly to life. Tedra stepped forward and pulled him out of the path of the Hunter before switching her DMR to fully automatic and finally ended the Hunter's life.

They were interrupted by the Sharquoi grabbing a Pelican from the air and threw it over the edge of the plaza now littered with the bodies of the fallen.

Will took the laser designator and pointed it at the Sharquoi.

"How do you kill this thing!?" he asked to nobody in particular.

"The Sharquoi are extremely tough to kill, when one goes on a rampage it's only stopped by heavy amounts of weaponry!" yelled Ripa rejoining him.

"Tagging it now! Commander Palmer! I need that uplink!" he yelled to the Commander who was busy trying to distract the monster who was getting ever closer to the Senate building.

"Dalton did you hear that? I need a missile strike or something! We're out of options with this!" yelled Palmer.

\_"Read you loud and clear! Receiving uplink now!"\_

The Sharquoi suddenly roared again and broke Palmer's cover of a ruined wraith tank with one hand. Will watched mutely as it knocked her aside with a second claw against the side of the Senate building and prepared a second strike.

"Palmer move!" he yelled. He decided that stupidity would win the day.

He charged the monster.

As he did so he primed a plasma grenade from a Storm he yanked off the ground and threw it. At the same time he pulled his knife out and hurled it as hard as he could before diving and knocking her out of the way of the monster.

Whether it was fate or divine intervention he didn't know but the plasma grenade adhered to a weaker part of the armor and blew a molten hole in. It reared back and its eye was pierced by a half foot long piece of reinforced, carbon bound, extremely dense Eridanian steel.

The ground shook as it howled in pain. It suddenly lashed out and Will knew it was over.

Suddenly a green blur intercepted it and the Sharquoi's claw was sliced off it reared back clutching its hand and roared.

Standing there was the tiniest alien Will had ever seen.

"Go we must, no? The Jedi order, arrived we have."

It looked at the trio of attackers with murder apparent in its damaged eye.

"Go, distraction I will be!" the alien said and Will didn't hesitate yanking Palmer who was drifting between consciousness and unconsciousness.

As the Sharquoi launched a massive punch at the alien it waited and then suddenly with a blinding amount of speed dodged it leaving it to smash into the side of the Senate building.

Will finished tagging it by throwing the tagging device inside the open roaring mouth. It choked on the sudden pill and roared even more.

"Attention all forces, coordinates received for ordinance support from Infinity. Archer missile inbound, danger close! All units get MSD!" The Spartan named Dalton said.

"Did you someone say Archer strike?" A marine asked.

"Affirmative." The same voice said. "I'd get your butt out of there if I were you."

Across the Battle-Net the cries for retreat and cursings came as word was spread of an imminent missile strike.

Will picked Palmer up and started running with a group of Clones that were firing and drawing it to the edge.

"Missile strike in thirty!" said someone. He looked up and saw the contrail of the missile usually reserved for ship to ship combat.

The green Jedi was doing an incredible job of leading the Sharquoi to the edge of the plaza and a subsequent drop. He was dodging taunting and goading it closer by slicing it with a lightsaber that was shorter than any he had seen before but was balanced for the three foot tall Jedi.

From behind a large group of Jedi emerged from the Senate and ran to the edge.

"15 seconds!"

And as one the Jedi spread their arms and shoved as the smaller Jedi leaped out of the way. From behind even Will could feel the effect of the massive force push. The Sharquoi howled as it was swept off the edge and fell for ten seconds to crash against an apartment building. The missile plunged downwards to the ground and lit up the world with a massive explosion of sound, heat, and light.

The world fell eerily silent for a moment afterwards before the sound of battle, sirens, and screaming elsewhere reached them.

Will looked over to see the remains of the Sharquoi blasted across a crater that threatened to collapse the apartment building.

"Storm is retreating! We've won!" yelled an ODST over the Battle-Net.

But something wasn't right with William.

The retreat patterns of the Storm reminded him of

"Oh no." he said suddenly with dread and he sprinted off towards the

area a group of ships were hovering above.

Suddenly the world for the second time that day was lit up by an explosion of light, heat, and sound as a cluster of CCS Battlecruisers belonging to the Storm lit up the world with their ventral projectors sending beams of energy into the ground below.

Everyone stopped what they were doing for a moment as the Storm exacted revenge for their defeat.

"Come on we got to do something! Let's go!" yelled Will who was watching as the beams of energy cauterized the planet's surface. The battle-net was flooded with different exclamations of horror as the Storm left their mark on the planet.

He stopped as he realized there was nothing they could do as the Battlecruisers stopped and tried to escape into atmosphere.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Terthi Astronomical Laboratory and Science Center<strong>

**\*\*Lower Levels\*\***

**\*\*13:32 Hours\*\***

The lab suddenly shook slightly. Dr. Vindi Yallat looked up nervously. They had been working with a team of scientists and every possible piece of data available. Nothing had added up so far. The signal was as hard to follow as seeing a Vapad's tentacles in motion. Now that they had a reference point as to what it was they found the signal propagated to a degree that they might not even try. They're only lead was that it was located somewhere in Wild Space.

They had one breakthrough with that-that turned out to be in a dead end when they followed a patchy segment where it promptly concluded in a region that had already been previously explored by merchants and traders thousands of years ago.

"What was that?" asked Vindi as she heard the ground tremble again.

"Hey, look over here!" spoke up one of the scientists looking at a Holographic screen.

On board a newscraft a team of reporters was broadcasting an image of the skyline where several of the Allied Species ships were flying towards the Senate.

"We're here live at the scene of several of the Allied Species ships which have descended. So far no side as provided an explanation as to why they have deployed troopsâ€|"

Suddenly one of the warships fired a ball of plasma which splashed across an apartment building setting it on fire.

"Oh my..!" someone said off screen.



In the conference room it suddenly the scientists stopped and glued themselves to the screen in fear.

"You have just witnessed an attack of the Allied Species on Coruscant. Everybody should take cover in the nearest building and hide! We'll keep you posted. We advise that everyone remain calm!"

There was a burst of light and a purple fighter streaked across the screen and fired its twin-linked plasma cannons hitting the newsraft.

The reporter and cameracrew screamed and suddenly the feed cut off.

The room suddenly erupted into chaos.

"Hold it!" yelled a Scientist. Everyone stopped.

"Why are they here?" yelled the Scientist. The room got instantly quiet as the room noticed Agent Dare and the others from the UNSC.

"Get them!" yelled one scientist.

They all moved.

"Wait!" cried Vindi running in front of the sudden mob of people.

They all stopped for a moment as both the ODST's and Clone's faced off.

"Back off you barbarian!" said the Sergeant hostilely.

"They attacked us!" yelled an angry Rodian.

"We're not the Sangheili you \*\*\*\*\*!" retorted an ODST with blue markings.

"Hey!" roared the leader, "Watch your mouth Romeo!"

"Whose side are you on Buck!?" asked Romeo.

"SHUT up!" roared someone else.

"I'm with Romeo on this one Boss, we're not exactly welcomed right now and far all we now, we're apparently attacking a planet now."

"Actually we didn't said Dare removing a comm link and switching to audible speakers.

The Battle-Net was suddenly alive with activity and report all referencing a 'Storm'.

"What is this supposed to mean?" asked a Scientist angrily.

"Does this facility contain external cameras?" asked Dare suddenly.

"..yes." someone answered after a moment the speaker stepped forward revealing himself to be a Clone trooper.

"Can it see the upper levels?" asked Dare after a moment walking over to see the Clone pull up the security cameras. He cycled them on a holographic screen until they were at a live feed of the skyline. From the small camera mounted on top of the large building the lab was built under they could see a raging battle. Several ships of the type that attacked the newscraft were attacking each other. The rumble they heard they soon realized was a warship that had speared itself through the top of a nearby building. The building hadn't collapsed but it was entirely on fire.

When Dr. Yallat asked the Agent what it was she quickly announced it was the mangled form of a CRS light cruiser.

"It looks like they're telling the truth." Said the same Clone after a moment. Taking off his helmet he pointed to where a small com unit was linked.

"Chatter suggests that somehow the Sangheili were infiltrated by a terrorist organization and they were trying to take the Chancellor prisoner."

The general reaction was interrupted by a Twi-lek pointing to the screen and hissing for the group assembled to look.

Dr. Yallat looked and the group quieted down and for a moment stared at the screen seeing nothing. She looked at it for a moment longer and saw a group of armored figures suddenly "appear" out of thin air surprising their Clone Guard out front cutting them down instantly.

Several cries greeted this display of violence.

"We're under attack!" said one of the Scientist's stating the obvious.

A pit formed in the Doctor's digestive tract as she processed this new threat entering the building.

A general cry of panic echoed throughout the room loudly as they watched them enter.

"What are we going to do?!" someone cried out.

"Dr. Yallat, does this building have emergency exits and an armory?" asked one of Agent Dare's companions.

"Why...yes. But we need to move fast before they cut it off!" she responded after a moment of thought.

"Right then," said Agent Dare. "Doctor we need to scramble this facility. If the Storm are coming here for the data we need to make sure they have no chance at retrieving it."

"But what about the data! You guys need it...don't you?" asked a greying scientist from the corner of the room.

"Survival comes first. Doctor, you have three minutes to get as much data as you can transportable and then scuttle the database." said Dare.

"What do you want us to do?" asked one of the Clones.

"The armory should be up your alley. Grab as many weapons as you can and meet us back here." Dr. Yallat said looking up at a map of the facility on a wall.

"Right ma'am! Troopers on the double!" the Clone ordered to the others.

The room scrambled into action as the group left ran for their assignments. Vindi scrambled to store the data in several different devices for transport.

She was still frantically working trying to compress as much information as possible when the Clones stormed back in the room with several military grade hand-held blasters and enough grenades to pulverize an AT-TE.

"Plans have changed! They're moving faster than we thought! We need to go!" the Sergeant barked.

Dare swore.

"Right.. grab a weapon and we're going. Doctor, scuttle the room."

Vindi reluctantly yanked the data out of the computer and ran taking a breath destroyed all their work with a single tap of a finger.

She motioned for someone to take the other data crystal she had in her hand. The Rodian did so and securing the place from intrusion they ran down a now darkened hallway. They attempted to do so silently but this group was civilian. Nowhere near military. They had all received basic training with a blaster in one form or another but their awkwardness with military grade hardware was evident.

Dr. Yallat led the group down the hallway until they came to a corner. She hesitated before remembering which direction their egress was.

"This way!" she hissed as the group turned as silently as they could and proceeded. A sudden THUMP swallowed their footfalls for a moment. It was loud enough to give them pause.

"What was that?" asked one of the Clones.

"Storm probably breached the room and are looking for the data!" yelled the Sergeant.

The group took off running at a faster pace and suddenly the halted as one of the Clones who had taken point froze.

"Krell, what's wrong!" the Sergeant asked suddenly sensing a state of panic in the Clone. Suddenly a massive figure uncloaked itself and a massive triangular bar of plasma came to life illuminating the hallway. The sword's edges sizzled and left a ghostly contrail as it

moved forward and impaled the Clone spearing it through eliciting screams from the rest of the group and a choked cry from Krell. The Zealot who unveiled himself in the light of the sword lifted the clone up before throwing him down and warbling in its alien tongue.

Vindi shrieked as the Zealot charged her. She pulled the trigger as fast as the blaster would allow surprisingly stunning the massive Elite. It slashed once almost catching her. The blade clashed against the wall sending fragments of molten rock and metal everywhere.

The ODS'T's opened fire with their weapons illuminating the hallway with yellow flashes. Hold-out blasters suddenly emerged among the Scientists and the Zealot tried to swing again. It lost its footing on its own victim and the Sergeant put its life to an end with a single shot to the head.

"Double time! Thermals on Troopers!" roared the Sergeant taking point.

Dr. Yallat still trembling fell behind the lead element.

"Up the ladder!" she croaked as they came to a dead end with a ladder.

The group filed one by one, the ODS'T's coming last leaving a large group of objects in the dark behind them.

"What's that?"

"Explosives, a good way to save us from being hit from behind." one of them deadpanned.

Satisfied they all left and promptly using an instantcrete barrier one of the ODS'T's by the apparent name of 'Rookie' had in the rucksack sealed off the tunnel exit as well.

Now they were faced with the problem of going up as they realized they were in an emergency exit shaft with a door on every floor.

The Rodian scientist pointed out a small set of stairs and the group slowly climbed up the derelict escape route. After a good five minute climb they reached the top.

They were left facing a small forgotten door that was slightly rusted. Upon testing it they opened it slowly revealing themselves to the outside world.

The sound of sirens, explosions, and the general ambient noise of battle greeted them.

The Soldiers' comm units suddenly came alive as they left the building and it's apparent excellent signal blocking properties.

The group all relaxed when a sudden explosion brought them to their senses. Suddenly rounding the corner was a massive rag-tag group of Civilians, Police Forces, and Clones that was running for their lives. A trio of Phantom's flew by dropping their units via grav-lift. All the Storm Elites unholstered their trademark weapon, the Type 55 Storm Rifle.

While Dr. Yallat had never seen one she gasped as they group of about a dozen began opening up on the Civilians letting out guttural roars of laughter. Others ran after slicing people apart with their swords. A group of Clones attempted to open fire but were struck down by a hail of pink crystalline needles from Needlers.

All at once Dr. Yallat's group opened up with their weapons stunning the group of blood-thirsty aliens who hadn't noticed them. The combined strain of the blasters bringing down four before they realized where they were being fired at. The leader of the group, a large alien in golden armor pointed a fist and barked orders at them.

"Follow the Civillians! Protect them at all costs! I want all non-combat personal as far as possible from these Split-Chins!" ordered Dare as a trio of the purple fighters that shot down the newscraft swung in far off between the space between the two sides of the street and promptly sent lethal amounts of plasma their direction.

"Dutch! Knock out the Banshees!" ordered their Sergeant.

Vindi watched as the ODST named Dutch unholstered a large gun of his back and pointed it at the Banshee's, it reminded her vaguely of one of the Republic's anti-tank weapons.

"What's-" she began to say.

She was cut off by the noise and light produced by the gun as it charged and then fired a single beam of concentrated energy.

"A laser!"\_ Dr. Vindi noted that, however crude the laser beam was by Galactic Standards, it was absolutely devastating. The beam of energy connected with the lead aircraft before vanishing from existence in the blink of an eye. It suddenly exploded, hunks of metal falling everywhere. The second one that had been following behind hit the wreckage and spiraled out of control smashing into one of the buildings on the right side of the street. Dr. Yallat gasped as she saw several beetle-like tanks and several smaller single-rider vehicles turn from around a corner.

The Golden Elite scowled and pointing a Carbine at the group of Scientists and soldiers promptly shot one of the Scientists through the heart. A scientist clutched the wound before dropping.

Dr. Vindi screamed as she saw the scientist's look of horror on his face before his face vanish with another shot from the fleet.

"We got Wraiths!" roared another ODST in red trimmed armor.

"Duly noted Mickey!"

"Everyone move!" ordered the Clone Sergeant firing a fully automatic burst forcing the Elite to dive to cover. "Clones! Grenades up and over!"

The troops that were with him responded by picking up a small sphere from off their backs and chucking it.

The Golden Elite dove out of the way before the others were consumed in a three blast explosion of fire and smoke.

The rest of the Golden Elite's bodyguards took the initiative and fanned out firing in bursts forcing the group to run to cover.

"Gunny! I got him!" said Romeo.

"Negative! That's an order!" the Sergeant hollered angrilily. The Wraiths fired and their trademark globular blue ellipses of plasma arced before crashing right in front of them.

Dr. Yallat screamed as they exploded and melted the ground where they struck. She was wondering how on Earth the ODST's could keep themselves calm.

She suddenly lost her nerve and ran towards where the civilians had been running the other scientists realizing what she was doing sprinted after her. She quickly rejoined the group running towards the direction of...she hadn't figured out that part the data module from earlier clutched in her hands.

"Doctor come back!" yelled the Clone Sergeant, he ordered the others to stop the other scientists. The ODST's scrambled to catch her as well.

She was running now past others laden with belongings, valuables, a blaster, anything of value. She ran past a market where Looters where attempting to grab as much as they could. When she saw others turning back suddenly she struggled to make out what they were running from but that became all to clear as a massive group of soldiers suddenly materialized out of the air and started firing into the crowd. Horrified screams met her ears as all around her the crowd was torn apart by the weapons of almost four dozen of this...Storm.

She ducked as a sword materialized out of the air and she tripped over an armored boot of the Elite that uncloaked she looked up weakly as it prepared to stab her. She grabbed the blaster and shot it hitting its head she followed up suddenly with a savage kick. She cried out as her foot suddenly was lanced with pain as her kick bounced off without so much as tripping the monster. Even so it was surprised long enough to startle it and have it be cut down. She looked and saw police forces herding everyone into a high-rise building. Overhead a flight of Laat/i's soared overhead and started firing at the enemy below and cutting through the aliens.

Suddenly they all seemed to retreat at once at random.

"We've won!" yelled someone else and suddenly the area was filled with cheering as the enemy all fled at once.

Dr. Yallat rolled over and tried to catch her breath. Her eyes watered as pain from kicking the Elite, or whatever it was called swallowed her up. She was vaguely aware of someone calling her name.

She opened her eyes slightly and saw Agent Dare looking her over.

"Are you all right Doctor?"

"I'm...I'm fine." she gasped as she got woozily to her feet.

Something still wasn't right though. Even as the enemy retreated trying to flee aboard their warships some of them seemed awfully interested in staying.

"What's going on with the ships?" she asked the Agent.

She looked confused as she pointed up at them. She paled suddenly and clutched her arm.

"What's going on?"

"We need to go-now!" she yelled suddenly. She looked back again as one of the larger ships began glowing electric blue at a small "port" on the bottom.

"Why?"

"Just do so!" she yelled dragging her. She yelped as the ONI agent dragged her.

"Buck?" can you hear me?" she yelled into a comm device.

"Yeah! What's the situation?"

"The Storm is going to glass the planet! I need you to tell the others that they need to be on the far side of that building in thirty seconds! That's all you're going to-"

A sudden crackling of lightning filled the air as several of the ships fired at once an immensely concentrated beam of plasma at the ground. It lit up the afternoon outshining the day for a second before fire filled the sky. And it was growing ever closer as the ships moved overhead uncaring for the Republic Navy that was trying to shoot them out of the sky. Missed shots filled the air with explosions of metal, glass, and smoke as the Navy tried to shoot down the offending ships. They were moving to slow she realized with a start.

"Into the building! Buck! Take cover!"

She led her into through the doors of a building still filled with cowering people. The two of them sprinted to the lower levels and they crouched into a corner as a blinding explosion shook the building.

Something struck Dr. Yallat and everything went black.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Thank you for bearing with me while I finished up school. It was very agonizing to not be able to touch this story in a while.<em></p></p>

\_We'll get to see in the next chapter the aftermath of events. Some of you may ask what's so important about the data even though it is

Forerunner? All this and more will be revealed in due time. This story is NOT dead!\_

\_Reviews are welcome!\_

\_theotherpianist\_

## 10. Chapter 10

\_Hey guys, **\*\*theotherpianist\*\*** is back with another chapter. I apologize for the wait and can only hope that this chapter is just compensation. Thank you to **\_\_\*\*Lord Razer \*\***for his submitted OC that is making his debut appearance. I am more than happy to work with you to weave in any ideas for characters and subplots. And additionally thanks to author **\_\*\*gwb99 \*\***for his work in beta-reading. Just a reminder that more betas make better stories. \_

\_And so in addition to not doing reviews from last chapter I shall be doing reviews for the previous two.

><em>

From Chapter 8: (Selected)

**\*\*\_battlecruiser03:\_\*\*\_You have received more.**

><em>

**\_\*\*Lord Razer: \*\*I haven't had the chance to explore them to some degree. This chapter seeks to start to address that.**

><em>

**\_\*\*MrToasterMan:\*\* Maybe reactions were slightly more over kill but you know. Will's demotion story is revealed. I hope you liked it. More exploration to be done.\_**

**\*\*\_Always bigger: \_\*\*\_There's a method to the madness.\_**

**\_\*\*Liberty86:\*\* Ehhh. You were on the right track...ish. Good guess. You were the closest. A cookie for you.\_**

From Chapter 9: (Selected)

**\*\*Earthpatriot117: \*\*Why thank you. I hope you enjoy this one.**

**\_\*\*Guest:\*\* It will make an appearance soon. I liked the Sharquoi as well. Its something no author has covered and I loved to interpret it freely. Should they show up more?\_**

**\*\*\_Divine Protector of Skyrim:\_\*\*\_first of all, awesome name, second of all when I have the chance to write as much as I possibly can I will update within two weeks if everything is going well.\_**

**\_\*\*OmegaInfinita:\*\* Thanks I hope dis chapter gunna be gud as well.\_**

**\_And to **\*\*FavGuest: \*\***I'm glad I could brighten a day somewhere.**



\_This story gets a little darker to the end but I'll explain more at the end okay?\_

><em>

\_Without further ado sit back and grab some popcorn.

><em>

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 10<p>

\*\*\*\*CSO Supercarrier

><strong>\*\*

\*\*Upper Orbit of Coruscant: \*\*

\*\*Thirty-five minutes after hostile contact with the Storm:\*\*

"Status report!" roared Rtas 'Vadum as the massive vessel descended into the skies of Coruscant amidst dueling ships on both sides.

"Storm forces are glassing a multi kilo-metrical section of the city! Mostly seems to be residential!"

"By the gods! Can we not do anything?" he growled frustrated gritting his mandibles. As he looked to see another dozen ships immediately appear and start engaging the Republic/Allied Species Ships.

"We can't! We'll hit the planet and cause more collateral damage! There are trillions on this planet!"

"Get me a link to Admiral Hood, the Arbiter, anybody!" he bellowed unable to contain his fury.

"We can't raise anybody!" an officer said, "they're scrambling communications, we're trying to figure out how but it's nothing like we've ever seen!"

"Can we get our smaller vessels to do something?"

"No Fleetmaster! We have a single cruiser sticking with us but that is not enough to take on as many warships of that caliber!"

He reflected on the situation at hand. He hated to admit it, but the Storm had taken everyone by surprise. The majority of the fleet had engaged the Storm forces in atmosphere but had to contend with someone or something being in the line of fire. Not to mention the problem civilian traffic had become, trying to help but getting in the way, intercepting enemy and friendly fire, this combined with how crowded the Republic had left the atmosphere left them without room to maneuver and thus to be taken advantage of when a second wave of reinforcements arrived.

He turned and felt a sinking sensation stomach as he turned in the direction of the weapons officer and prepared to take things into his own hand as the Supercarrier descended to an altitude above the ships that were glassing a sizeable area of Coruscant.

"Weapons?"

"Fleetmaster?"

"I want you to transfer manual weapons control to me! I'm going to knock them out myself!"

"Doing so!" the Sangheili warbled in his native tongue.

Rtas strode over to a holopad and typing a few commands took control of the Supercarrier's weaponry and pulled up a large viewscreen giving him a birds-eye view of the fleet still glassing. They were expanding and engaging the Republic's ships on the far end. They were having mixed success but the Republic was not devoting enough ships to keep them contained.

"Order the Republic out of the way." he said as the carrier moved above the surface of the megalopolis. The Republic had sent a detachment of light warships to try and deter them only to have them clinging to life. This battle was a horrific mess.

"Right away!"

Rtas took a breath and prayed that his nerve or hand wouldn't flinch.

"Firing plasma torpedoes."

He fired three each directed for a CCS Battlecruiser.

"Fleetmaster! The lead vessel is showing signs that they are carrying some of our scientists and valuable data! Abort your fire!" someone yelled.

He cursed and felt a lump as he tried to force the direction of the torpedoes away from the CCS Battlecruisers. They simply weren't moving fast enough away. There were no other enemy targets but the Republic's vessels and a group of highrise apartment buildings. Either he would risk losing valuable data, hundreds of lives of the Republic's military, or thousands of civilians most likely stuck hiding in their apartment buildings.

The gods have mercy on him...the Republic still hadn't moved.

The plasma torpedo streaked downwards ever onwards towards a target.

He suddenly made up his mind and slammed his fist on the controls. It veered to the rear of the lead Battlecruiser. The torpedo glanced off the rear still inflicting damage but spiraling towards a highrise apartment building.

He prayed no one was in that building as it exploded and sent spiraling columns of smoke, metal, glass, and fire in every direction.

"Report!" he yelled as the rest of the plasma hit their mark causing explosions to chain down two of them as their shields gave out and the plasma ate its way inside.

"Storm vessels are trying to retreat! They're pulling all ground units out!" Said an Officer.

"Move the ships to cut off atmospheric escape and launch boarding parties. I want three Lances of Infantry helping with ground operations below. See if there are any more Phantoms that can be pulled to put out the fires." As an afterthought he added, "There will be infantry left on the ground still, deploy search and kill teams on board.

"It is done."

He allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction as the Storm suddenly became very nervous about the idea of going toe to toe with a larger navy, their advantage of surprise worn off.

He was interrupted by a frantic Minor.

"Fleetmaster! They're trying to jump to Slipspace!"

The Fleetmaster cursed as he realized they had been sucker punched. He had completely ruled out using slipspace in atmosphere. He growled as their lack of honor showed through with their cowardly tactics.

"Communications are back!" the Comm officer yelled.

"Order everyone a safe distance away! Weapons, do we have a lock?"

"Negative! Radiation from their drives is scrambling it!"

"Fire Sentinel probes one through nine, I want to know where they're going! If they flee without retribution they will be back!"

Rtas was referring to an invention of the UNSC's making that had been adapted on the other warships. The Mk. 2 Slipspace Transmitting Location Device. A small object that was specifically hardened to penetrate within the hull of a vessel and use real time coordinate data, transferred through Slipspace. If there was to be any hope for striking back it had to be taken now.

Moments later a SpecOps Unggoy confirmed they had hit their mark and were transmitting.

There was still the problem of how to stop them from flattening an even larger section of the planet with a Slipspace jump.

Suddenly he had a moment of inspiration.

"Helm! Quickly, get us behind and underneath the Cruisers!"

"What?"

"Do it! We don't have time!"

The Supercarrier lurched as it dove for the surface before suddenly straightening out. The Storm suddenly had to force themselves heading

towards space to avoid being crushed by the behemoth warship. He smiled as they had to force themselves out of the way and put-off their jump a little longer.

"Shields full forward!"

And then the massive maws of a ship transferring to slipspace appeared right in front of them. The effect of it in atmosphere was enormous creating an enormous blast and shockwave the Supercarrier weathered out alone. After a blinding flash of light, the ships that had just been trying to exact revenge were gone. The situation was being repeated in orbit as well from the sound of the Battle-Net.

He sighed as the threat of the enemy dissipated almost as quickly as they had arrived.

As he tried contacting the Arbiter he looked at the chaos still boiling all around him.

He had a lot of explanation to do.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Allied Species Phantom<strong>

\*\*Senatorial District of Coruscant\*\*

\*\*Minutes after Storm Retreat: \*\*

Zek Lhar was bored. He should've been excited, a chance to get off the massive boat off a warship that he had been stuck on for the past few months but nevertheless as he adjusted the removable scope fitted to his right eye he was bored scanning the surface looking for any straggling Storm. He hated being stuck on this Forerunner forsaken rock. He saw a flicker of movement below, double checking for the profile of a Storm Elite he lazily pointed the gun and fired. The accelerated ionized hydrogen gas left a flash for a second before the Elite collapsed to the ground, a smoking hole through its eye.

He thought for a moment about the rumors that circulated around him. He was seen as a legend by those aspiring to be the best marksmen in the galaxy. The biggest was that he had killed a Spartan II, the actual truth was that he had killed a Spartan III on Reach but who cared, killing one of the best warriors in the galaxies tended to get the perfect amount of respect and push to get his way in anything, which in fact he did.

The Skirmisher put the weapon down and complained to the others surrounding him.

"How long are we going to be stuck on this stupid rock?"

A Sangheili from behind muttered a reply of "however long it takes."

Zek flashed an angry glance his way that the Elite ignored. If he had his way he wouldn't be here but rather on a ship of his own doing what he and his race did best, pirating. He felt a surge of anger towards the Sangheili. He had a long stemming hatred of the Sangheili stemming back from when he had been on his homeworld when the

Covenant had made a surprise "visit" and had forced the induction of the Skirmisher sub-species into the war with Humanity. He had refused and the Zealot had promptly assassinated his family on the spot and his career as a fun-loving pirate who was always one for action had suddenly ended. His love for any Sangheili died with his family that day.

He had been forced with his ship to take action on Reach where almost all of the Skirmishers were killed in some way or another. That battle had changed him. He had forgone his sense of daring and adrenaline seeking for a cold, calculating, personality almost like that of a Mercenary.

He had a growing dislike of the UNSC stemming from his belief that they were overstepping their bounds of authority. It had been the Human race and the Sangheili that had the best of things when all was said and done, the Brutes were still regressing into tribal states, the Ungoy were still cowards as ever, and the rest of the species had generally been left behind to serve as pawns for both sides. While it was true the Allied Species was a growing attempt to equalize he believed they would never be equal. The Kig-Yar and Skirmisher sub-species had done things as they always had without causing a conflict that spanned almost a quarter of a galaxy and never caused problems to the degree that Humans and Sangheili had.

The Sangheili, particularly the Storm, were idiots, morons for believing that the Forerunners were meant to save all of them through a "Great Journey". And when the news came of the fraudulent nature of it he had laughed in derision, mocking those that had believed. From the start of the Great-War he had tread a very careful path along the line of being called a heretic coming close to being silenced numerous times due to his general outspoken opinion on the Covenant religion, the incident with the Spartan helped save him during those tensest moments, even, when he lost his temper with a group of Sangheili in the aftermath of the fall of the Human Colony and killed all ten of them, in cold blood.

Due to his impressive service record he was got off free of guilt and responsibility, even managing to get the Major overseeing the group in trouble and shipped off to a Sangheili prison when, in fact, he had been innocent and had nothing to do with the incident. He had later been sold out by an Ungoy for it and had thus developed a intense dislike of the species.

As the Phantom banked he felt a minor discomfort crawling all around him, one that made his breath catch for a moment and make him want to writhe. This discomfort was perhaps the greatest kept secret that any part of ONI had. Not even construction of the Infinity had rivaled this. To his sure knowledge the only people that knew anything was ONI Project Freelancer and one or two other individuals. Originally it had been designed as a experiment to put the average human into armor and ready to beat the Spartan Project in every aspect.

However, there had been a darker side to it. When the word had reached him that the Project needed Skirmisher test subjects to try out a method of augmentation found in a Forerunner Combat skin (from which the Generation II Prefect and Focus armor variants for Spartan IV's had been developed) he had volunteered to try out having

nanobots embedded within him into his own "Personal" armor skin of his own.

To his horror he had realized too late it was a ploy by a mad scientist Sangheili that ultimately cost his other subjects an extreme amount of pain before death.

Even thinking about it caused him to feel instantly nauseous and he had to clear his head aboard the Phantom before anyone realized.

All of them had met this grisly end except Zek. He didn't know why, how, or what, but what he did know was when he was off the operating table trembling and shaking from all the pain and rage he had found he had lost it then and promptly murdered the Scientist and the team with levels of strength and speed that had never been seen before.

An ONI Black Ops team had found him curled up in a corner terrified of what he had done. They had given him a way to fulfill his desire to be a Mercenary and a clean slate. He took it and was consistently ONI's perfect assassin, lithe, nimble, lethal, but most importantly, better than any Spartan. And so he spent his days tied to the Intel Group and on a tight leash. At least a dozen terrorist cells had vanished because of him, taken by surprise from his nature and abilities.

He had become dissatisfied quickly because of their treatment of him and on a mission decided to leave right then and there and sever contacts with the Humans. He had joined a Pirate Crew which had then been promptly hired to fight a war here, in a Forerunner forsaken planet. He cursed again as he thought about his current situation.

The experiment wasn't completely bad though, the nanites used in manipulating the armor had bolstered his physical capabilities incredibly and on occasion he had the experience where he swore he could feel another individual's thoughts. The downside was he could never remove his armor completely. That would blow his secret to success wide open...

A Storm Jackal poked his head out from underneath a pile of rubble and felt himself tumbling head over heels as his hard was ripped out from another shot from Zek.

He gazed boredly out of the Phantom listening to the idle chatter. There was a growing rumor that somehow the Forerunners had left a mark in this galaxy, particularly among the Zealot, two of them were discussing it now.

"I don't understand brother, we were called here to the edge of a portal because the UNSC found something, yet there not willing to share what it is.

"Are you trying to suggest the Humans are trying to back-stab us? You know that the Human race is naturally wary of us right now, what with the Reclamation Conflict and everything going on. How could they not trust us?"

"I wonder whether it was Forerunner."

"Nonsense. We've only been deployed so far looking for communication data on that heathenish planet we burned. No I think we're looking for something valuable only to the UNSC."

"Bah Rek', you and your conspiracy theories."

He tuned them out as he went back to scanning the ground and promptly saw a Storm Zealot clawing on the ground. He was about to eliminate it when someone yelled at him to stop.

"That one is a prisoner." growled the Sangheili in charge.

The Phantom turned and started descending towards them.

The troops had disembarked and walked up to the wounded Zealot who was shamefully begging for mercy.

"You, growled an Ultra. How did you infiltrate? Why did you attack? Answer me this coward!" he roared shaking it.

"Please, I don't know how but there is a spy in your ranks on the Supercarrier! We were sent here because the Didact's hand ordered us to cause a war between you and the Republic and to get to the planet specified in the data you recovered!" Zek wanted nothing more than to shoot the miserable creature.

"Why?!" roared the Ultra again.

He opened to make a reply when a needle flew from no where and smashed through his eye. He twitched and died as it found his brain.

"Snipers! Find cover!" roared one of the Zealots.

Zek turned and scanned the skyline and with another fluid motion sent a Jackal toppling off a skyscraper before it hit the ground hidden by the distance.

They were suddenly in a firefight on all sides as a group of Ragtag Storm made themselves visible with weapons firing fully automatic.

Zek took the initiative and bounded away jumping behind a Elite before impaling it with the sword on its hip. It let out a gurgled cry and slumped to the Earth. He ran again another two struggling to catch it. He wasn't going as fast as the nanites allowed him but it was fast enough to give him the edge as he bounded over and smashed a Jackal to the ground killing it by snapping its neck.

He then unsheathed his own weapon, a sword made of a metal on his homeworld. It was small, able to be concealed, and expanding. A trademark weapon of a Pirate. A grunt found this out the hard way as Zek shoved the base of the hilt against the idiotic creature and clicked the switch keeping it collapsed. The short slightly curved bladed exploded out the other side and it gave a particularly pitiful scream before he beheaded it savagely.

\_Swish\_

\_Slash\_

\_Snip\_

\_Stab\_

Four more Sangheili joined the Unngoy he had beheaded on the ground lifeless, blood pouring from their open wounds.

Then just as quickly as they had gone, all were dead.

\_"Back on the Phantom."\_ the Ultra growled over the Battle-Net.\_  
"We'll report our findings at once."  
><em>

And the Phantom turned its way back to the Supercarrier. Unaware that it was missing an occupant.

As Zek watched the Phantom fly away he smiled to himself. Now he just had to disappear off the grid for a while and his freedom was secured. With any luck he would be able to rob a freighter or something and return back. At last he could finally return to the life he had known before.

He sprinted down a corridor and disappeared out of sight.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Slipspace<strong>

\*\*Storm crewed CAS Class Assault Carrier Song of Retribution

><strong>

\*\*Destination and Time unknown,  
><strong>

\*\*Dr. Vindi Yallat\*\*

Dr. Yallat woke with a groan, her head throbbing from where she had been smacked by a blunt object. All that she knew was she was on an enemy ship headed to who knows where. She could only guess as to why she was grabbed but she only could think of the option that, in any case, she was a Prisoner with information.

She didn't even need to guess what would inevitably come as a result of her being captured. She could only try to hang on.

Was she expendable? She didn't know that yet, all she knew was that she was in a cell behind an energy shield with a Holoprojector occasionally flickering with various things aboard the Ship. She knew that the ship was in slipspace, a concept she as of now still didn't understand. What she could hypothesize was that it was very similar to travel by use of lightspeed and a hyperdrive and was some form of inter-dimensional travel. The what and the how still eluded her because of the migraine she had.

She felt the ship hum and "slow down" indicating they had come out of slipspace.



She realized she was laying sideways on the cold floor and sat up so her back was against the wall. That done she reflected on how she could have gotten to this state. All she remembered was something smacking her, and then a vague recollection of Agent Dare trying to rescue her as she was carried over the shoulder of a massive Sangheili with holographic markings.

She knew that there had been some sort of catastrophic energy wave launched at the surface of the planet because of the beam of light she remembered seeing burning the planets surface. She had been knocked out again when she tried to resist.

Now she was here. She guessed they had been waiting for her to awake for the Elite that had grabbed her appeared through a door that hummed as it opened.

All around guards materialized out of thin air and bowed as the Sangheili walked up to her cell and powered down the shield. White hands painted on glistened of the ambient blue light and the holograph shimmered.

"You will come with me." he growled.

She had no choice but to agree as two of the guards flanked her with those weapons that dealt death easily and quickly.

She followed him through several different corridors before finally arriving on the bridge.

The first thing she noticed was a small planet, green, lush, verdant, dotted with wide and vast patches of snow and ice. Several huge inland seas dotted it.

"What planet is that?" the Elite asked.

She looked at it. She had never seen it before in her life.

"Uhm...I...I...I don't know!? Do you have star data?" she stammered trying to ascertain the Elite's reaction

Obviously unsatisfied he glared at her and barked an order to another Elite who brought her to a round circular table. Above which was projected several different holographs, one of the data recovered from the lab on Coruscant, a map of the galaxy, and their current position in the Wild Space region.

She reached out and touched manipulating it. None of it made sense.

"Well...I don't understand this-I've never seen this planet before! Please you must understand!" she begged as the Elite gave her a hard stare of disgust.

"Return her. Leave her there for another two days if you wish"

"'Mdama! Human distress signals detected!" cried out of one the other Elites on the bridge.

'Mdamma gave a sort of snort of surprise and dropped her doubling back.

"Where?!"

"Inside the planet?" suggested someone else in surprisingly good Basic.

"No, they can't have beat us already. Deploy all forces! I want them dead now!" he barked and the Bridge came to life.

He turned to her and motioned for the two guards to take her back.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Coruscant<strong>

**\*\*Chancellors Office\*\***

**\*\*20:00 hours, two days after Storm Attack**  
><strong>

The planet is in a state of lockdown, in various apartments, homes, shops, and business' all around living creatures weep, some in fear, others in terror, some in anger, but the majority in grief. Everyone living on the planet can see the smoke cloud that has been ejected high into the upper atmosphere, smell the smoke and fumes of death still very much alive and present, taste the flesh vaporized on the air, hear the whine of sirens and of the military still fighting pockets of resistance. A mark to the enormity of what has happened. As night begins to descend and the heat begins to create strong storms the reality of what has happened has struck home for many. Night is falling for many and they pray to live to see the day.

The office of Chancellor Palpatine was veiled in shadows. Not that it wasn't a normal occurrence. The smoke and gathering storm clouds outside reflected his mood. And for the hundredth time that day he cursed at his blindness.

The Supreme Chancellor held a secret almost as enormous as the universe itself. The Persona of a Chancellor, his image as a man who sought the common good for all in the Republic, his image as kind old uncle type of figure, it was all a lie. A masterfully created facade to serve the Dark Lord of the Sith and the shadowy head of the Confederacy of Independent systems.

The truth of everything was for the past two decades he had been working behind the scenes to put in place a plan. A plan that was an additional thousand upon thousands of years in the making with only one goal in mind passed down by the very few and select, the complete rule of the galaxy and the destruction of the Jedi Order and the Birth of the Sith Empire.

And now everything, everything, that he had worked for so long to bring to fruition was threatening to collapse around him. His key to his overwhelming success was the fact that he could account for every variable. But with the arrival of yet another faction into the middle of the war that he had orchestrated and was essentially playing god over was something that he had never accounted for. And now he was being dragged into conflict with the Allied Species and a

Splinter faction group that had caused an unbelievable amount of destruction and chaos on the planet.

He was being dearly reminded of this fact as the Confederacy was taking the initiative and bombarding them with their own propaganda. The planet thus far was split between ousting the Allied Species and allowing them to stay.

He paused to reflect on the Allied Species as he paced the room waiting for Admiral Tarkin to report to him on something being deemed as "vitally important."

The UEG, really it was quite sad how far humanity had made it as far as their technological advancement. The Republic was eons ahead of them in technological advancement. One had to wonder how on Coruscant they had fought off the other members of the Allied Species in the last war they had fought, and \_won.\_

Oh well, really, he would have to do something to help them along. His Chancellor persona wanted to, eventually, absorb them through their common roots of humanity. Giving them help in their darkest hour wouldn't be bad either. His mind was formulating all ready how he could manipulate them and the Confederacy into doing that.

His Sith persona wanted to take over through domination somehow. One couldn't deny a relatively unadulterated galaxy was a hefty prize and goal to seek to win. And in all honesty, Warfare looked like an easier path.

But as with everything all good things came to those he waited. A Campaign in the Milky Way would be utterly disastrous if he didn't have the problems in his own galaxy, deemed by the Allied Species as Andromeda, solved beforehand. The time was ripe for him to execute the final phase. He just needed an apprentice and once that fell into place the two galaxies were his. Skywalker, the Chosen One. He needed to have a conversation with him as well.

Lightning crackled outside marking the beginning of a thunderstorm illuminating the scarred surface of the planet. It was unbelievable how much damage the Storm had caused. Millions had died and billions more were baying for the Chancellor to announce his course of action.

He remembered the Speech he had given in a speeder high above the burned and ashen surface of the planet. The beams had been so powerful that the Undercity of Coruscant saw daylight for the first time in millennia and the Lowercity had been exposed all covered in a still cooling sea of glass, rock, and metal.

He was watching a recap of it on television. He wore a set of black robes to signify his grief and as he stood in the speeder with news crews filming him he had said the following. He now watched his own speech on a holoscan.

\_"Citizens of the Republic, Judges of the Law, Forces of our Military, Jedi of the Republic, and Senators of the Constitution. Today I stand here-here at the site of a shameful and malicious attack to share in your grief. Today we remember a tragedy of calamitous proportions, that on two days ago we were attacked by a rogue military group known only as the Storm who in the space of less

than a hour caused the deaths of 45 million of your brothers and sisters, wives and husbands, parents and children. I can't not express how moved I have been by your signs of support, of banding together. This is what the Republic is and stands for."\_

He allowed a small smile to fade before readdressing the cameras.

\_"But before I continue you I must extend my thanks to our friends in arms, the Allied Species who with our own army drove the Storm from our planet within the hour. I thank our Police Forces and the valiant efforts of the soldiers still out there making sure this planet is devoid of the enemy. But I would like to extend my biggest thanks to the citizenry of Coruscant who have done an unparalleled job of keeping the ideals of the Republic in their hearts in the aftermath of this attack. Thank you for your cooperation, your devotion, and your ability to reach out."\_

He became choked up as one of the few buildings standing in the circle fell. Palpatine was satisfied with his performance. By bringing the right touch of emotion his words held a power few could dispute.

\_"What you see hear is the result of a genocidal group of religious aliens who felt it was their duty to send a message to the Republic at its center. This enemy and its **\*\*malicious\*\*** agenda is not so different than others we currently face because we are the target of a single universal attempt by the Confederacy, by enemies at home, by pirates and slave rings, by the Storm to stamp out and staunch the blood of freedom, to bring an end to civilization, to **\*\*orchestrate the downfall of the Republic!\*\***"\_

\_It has always been the intent of **\*\*every\*\*** enemy of democracy that they stamp out the voice and light of freedom with fear and confusion and doubt! Today, tomorrow, forever, it has always remained the same! But let me speak to you."\_

A tear started rolling down his face.

\_"I beg of you, let me **\*\*speak\*\*** to you about those souls who have left this life. As they were huddled in that circle they must have tried to console themselves, their loved ones, their children, all trying to encourage each other that they would be all right, and as there voices of fear, confusion, and unspeakable terror were consumed by the fire their voices became one of anger, revenge, of unity!\_

\_Even now their voices are raised in agony because they remain unavenged! They lie **\*\*forever\*\*** in that sea of glass and metal their **\*\*ashes\*\*** and **\*\*bones\*\*** all **\*\*melted\*\*** into one. And forever more they shall remain that way! Because **\*\*we failed\*\*** to keep them protected! **\*\*We failed\*\*** to keep our promise that all shall leave peacefully in our Republic! **\*\*We let\*\*** them be **\*\*burned!\*\*** **\*\*We let\*\*** them be **\*\*glassed!** We let **\*\*them be turned into ash!\*\*** **\*\*We let\*\*** them be **\*\*immolated\*\*** on a pyre of our faults! We couldn't act fast enough because the Senate isn't fast enough to keep up with the pace of war! Our failure must never again happen! Tonight no more destruction! We shall act with the Allied Species and hunt down the Storm throughout the galaxy until all are dead! We shall meet tonight to discuss a course of action and then call the Senate together

tomorrow in defiance of the Storm and their cowardice! Their unspeakable treachery! Their dishonor!"\_

He finished livid with anger and regained his composure. Closing with a few remarks of never forgetting\_ wh\_at happened it moved on to other news.

A knock on the door reminded him of Admiral Tarkin. Feeling through the force it was actually the Admiral he shouted a command to enter.

He walked in crisply shaven and his Republic Navy Uniform immaculately in place. He snapped to a salute.

"Report Admiral. What is it you wish to speak to me about?"

"Chancellor. It is my opinion that you consider what I'm about to say very carefully. Have you been following why the Allied Species are here?"

"Admittedly no, I wasn't. I was too busy trying to make the sure the planet didn't want to go to war over their sudden appearance." The Chancellor said truthfully.

"It would interest you my Lord that the Allied Species are here on a two fold mission then. Firstly, two of their vessels have been in this galaxy for some time and have sent out distress signals. They have come to retrieve them and find out what happened to the crew and the ship."

The Chancellor's brow furled. He felt the truth of what the Admiral was saying again through another touch of the force.

"How was it then that we haven't picked it up. Is it that old and archaic?"

"No sir, that's what I was going to talk to you next about. They are here because they believe something has been actively jamming the transmission on a galactic scale."

"How-exactly how could one do that? Our technology isn't that powerful. It's not the Separatist's is it?"

"No sir."

"The Chiss?"

"No sir."

"The Infinite Empire?"

"Closer but no."

"Then what pray tell is it?!" the Chancellor asked a little annoyed at this point that none of his guesses were corrected. If this brought up even more unforeseen variables...

"Forerunners." said Admiral Tarkin.

"What?" said the Chancellor trying to make sure he heard right.

"Forerunners, according to the Allied Species they're the beings that shaped life in the galaxy as they know it."

The Chancellor suddenly remembered Lord Hood's speech given.

"And they came here?" he said without a moment of hesitation.

"That's what they're thinking. It's also why I think you need to act. We need to establish at least a base of operations where we can study the nature of their tech in one way or another. And the word is the Storm abducted a Republic scientist which makes this our fight just as much as theirs. They have a lockdown on their position in Wild Space and the word of mouth is that they're going to jump from orbit and leave."

Palpatine waited for him to speak and finish but realizing that was it he stopped.

"So that's it? They're just going to pack up and leave?" He asked with a note of incredulity.

"Yes sir."

"Unacceptable! Admiral, I want a fleet put together as fast you can. Prepare yourselves for a long stay on the planet. If the Allied Species think they can just walk away with our alliance meaning nothing than so be it. The condemnation of all rests on them."

"It will be done sir."

"Good Admiral. Thank you for your valiant service. You have proved a valuable addition to the Republic. Report to me when you're done." The Admiral saluted and left at once with a spring in his step.

Alone again the Supreme Chancellor allowed his Sith persona to shine through again.

He smiled as an idea came to mind. He had the perfect way to try and bring the Allied Species into the galaxies fold and trip over themselves to be part of the Republic. And he had the perfect way in mind.

He strode over to a holographic transmitter and keying in a code reserved for the Political Head of the CIS.

The blue image of Count Dooku appeared kneeling.

"Master, what is thy bidding?"

"I must be brief my apprentice, I have received word of a new...participant in this war of ours. I have the perfect opportunity for you to strike back at them to make up for your General's failure to destroy them on Rhen Var."

"You have my interest."

"There is a planet that has been discovered by enemies of the Allied Species. On this planet is a wealth of technology dating back millions of years ago belonging to a now extinct race. On this planet two of their vessels have crashed. Secure them and any technology you can find. But be wary, the Republic is on the move and the Storm, the terrorist organization that attacked the Republic today will likely consider you a threat. Deal with them as such."

"It shall be done my master." And the holograph fizzled out.

Palpatine sat back with a smile relieved. His plan had only suffered a minor setback. The road to bringing the galaxy and the UEG was paved and waiting for him with open arms. One just simply had to take that first step.

He strode out of his office to the Shuttle Dock. With any luck, he would help escalate this problem and make the Allied Species indebted to him.

\* \* \*

><p><strong><strong>Coruscant<strong>\*\*

\*\*Quarantine Zone, Galactic City  
><strong>

\*\*21:00 hours:\*\*

Will picked his footing carefully along the edges of the steaming crater where the Storm had glassed the planet.

The Allied Species in an effort to try and get their good image back had sent down as many personal as possible for help in patrolling and eliminating pockets of Storm resistance left on the planet. It had taken forever but with as many troops stationed with the massive fleet as well as Civilian Militias, Republic Police Forces, and the GAR itself, they had lifted the lockdown on the entire planet and the skies were filled with hesitant sky traffic who was growing more and more confident the threat had been eliminated. The councilor's with the exception of the Arbiter and Rtas 'Vadum had all been evacuated back for the safety of their own galaxy.

Those who were still left on the ground were left to look for survivors and to secure the area for decontamination. The Republic had done the brunt of it making sending in Fireships to hose down the area and scrub the nearby surrounding city for radiation. That waste was being sent to a massive facility that processed, cleaned, and then hurled into space into the sun by usage of a Mass Driver, one almost similar to those he had seen on Reach and other colonies, just on a more gargantuan scale.

Because the area was so heavily irradiated and concentrated further in, anyone here had to be dressed in EVA gear. This wasn't a problem for Chelsea and him or the other Spartan IV's as they combed the area in a rough line. Word was all of Infinity's Spartan IV Fireteams had been deployed. It truly was a massive number, almost 350 or so. He glanced over at a Sangheili Ranger team who was combing a ruined apartment building.

Overhead floodlights provided by Phantoms, Falcons, and Larties gave light to the area.

A squad of Unngoy ran by carrying a wounded civilian found.

William and Chelsea were still attached to Fireteam Majestic. When the order came for Palmer to report to the Supercarrier to attend a meeting she had ordered them back to a Phantom. They were almost aboard when they felt the ground rumble.

"What was that?" asked a Clone looking up alert.

"I don't know. Let's move-"

But the CO was suddenly swallowed up with his squad by a hole that opened up in the ground.

They gave screams as they fell down.

\_"This is Commander Fox, anybody have an eye on those troopers? Their transponders just went dark!"\_

Will was first to reply, "They were swallowed up by a hole in the ground!"

He heard him curse.

\_"This is the Arbiter." \_interrupted a voice on the public frequency. \_"Seismic scans show the area is weakening significantly, we recommend all Search and Rescue teams break off!"\_

\_"You heard the Alien, all troopers report for the nearest Gunship."\_ a Clone said over the general frequency.

And the ground opened up underneath another squad of Clone Troopers. They gave frightened yells as they fell and the Battle-Network was thrown into confusion again.

\_"Was that another squad?"\_

\_"-quick back to the Phantoms!"\_

\_"-Palmer to all Fireteams, we're pulling out!"\_

Will and Chelsea made a sprint to a Phantom with its gravity lift active. They felt the familiar pull and tug and soon were inside with a large group of Skirmishers mixed with Marines and other Allied Species troopers.

\_"Castle, sit-rep now!" \_Palmer was barking at them.

"We're onboard a Phantom right now."

\_"Acknowledged, report for the Supercarrier conference room when you have the chance. They've called a meeting and I want you and Majestic as part of the Security Detail. Palmer out."

><em>

Before either could make a reply she cut and the video link of her



face on the side vanished.

A squad of ODST's jumped aboard and the Phantom made a taxi run to drop people off prompting Will to wonder off hand about where his other brothers were.

"Well so much for rescuing everyone." said Chelsea as they watched pockets of the ground swallow wreckage with Pelicans, Falcons, and other transports fleeing the scene.

The Phantom banked and flew towards the Supercarrier which had all navigation lights and few floodlights on to help the sky traffic see the Behemoth.

It banked one more time before flying through a hangar where they could have easily fit the Dauntless or Infinity and then dropping the rest of the individuals off. William and the others walked through a decontamination unit that was set up for all ground teams.

"Sarah where's the Conference room?" Will probed the AI trying to get his surroundings.

A video image of her surrounded by fields of data popped up in the corner of his helmet.

"Fancy teleporting?" she asked.

"I don't suppose I have a choice."

"Well the nearest station is 500 yards from you. The deck your looking for is 14D. Turn left and it should be pretty obvious."

Will turned and located the station motioning Chelsea along. They both stepped onto a pad that looked somewhat like a ship-to-ground lift. A holographic station with a number system and keyboard lit up. Punching in 14D and then engage Will felt slightly disoriented until coming to rest on a similar station in front of a energy shielded dome. They were above the conference room which could fit a Prowler end to end. A ramp running down to a massive set of doors.

He gestured Chelsea over and greeted the two Honor Guards that stood in front of it.

"Demons? Are you part of the detail?"

"Yes."

"You're requested by an Admiral."

"Which one? I know many." answered Will in Sangheili.

The guard obviously surprised by the Spartan and his grasp of his language answered, "One Admiral Tchkova."

Will let that settle in for a moment and then thanked him. The Guard gestured to his general direction in a sea of men, women, and other species in attendance.

The two Spartans stepped trough the threshold and Will saw the Admiral standing out from a group of others.

"Ahh, yes you are here Spartan." said the slightly gravelly voice of Fleet Admiral Tchkova. He was a Native of Reach, a survivor of impossible odds through and through with a kindly smile but aged face.

"Am I required sir?" asked Chelsea not wanting to interrupt.

"My apologies Spartan but this is meant for your Commander."

She bowed and left the two of them alone.

"Firstly." said the Admiral looking him square in the eye, "I want to congratulate you on keeping the Dauntless in one piece during my recovery at home. I arrived earlier today and assumed command of the Dauntless but, I am sorry to hear of the incident with Del Rio that he has now tried to use to court-martial you. I of course intervened and spared you the trouble of all that but I wanted to apologize mostly for the whole incident of putting you in charge."

"Why sir?" he said slightly confused.

"Because a lot of criticism is being drawn your way and for the moment, in light of your demotion and stripping of rank by Osman or whatever lackey did it I would like to apologize if anything happened as a result. I accept that as my fault you were put in charge. I was only putting who I thought best to command at the time."

"Sir, you're fine. Why? What criticism? I've only heard confusion expressed not anger."

"Then I guess you haven't heard. Spartan, the only thing keeping you out of trouble right now is a combination of my intervention and that of others, your track record of getting the job done, and the fact that you are sorely needed on the battlefield. The incident with Del Rio earlier is starting to snowball a little bit. For now I would lie low and...as much as I hate to say it, apologize to Del Rio. No, I know what you're going to say. Don't." he said closing down Will's protest.

"He has enough authority to pull a few strings, some of those with rather...unpleasant consequences. And as justified as you may have been it still looks like serious insubordination when everything boils down, at least that's how the courts will see it. And it's also drawing attention to the Spartan Program as well. Attention that for the moment is not needed. Attitudes are starting to shift a bit."

"I see sir. I'm fully sorry and accept any and all-"

"Just...put up with him. Ok? I don't need a student taking a thrashing over something I intended. And I get how unfair the higher-ups have been to you, especially over what happened to get you demoted. It wasn't your fault. You were just in the wrong time and wrong place. And I feel like your decision to abandon a Prowler with high-levels of valuable data on it to save the crew and abandon ship without scuttling it considering the circumstances was perfectly logical and justifiable. The fact the Captain had turned it on you was completely unfair. But what's done is done."

Will underneath the helmet flushed slightly. He was of course

referring to the sole reason why he now held the rank of a Lieutenant instead of a Commander. It was when on a deployment to a Storm owned planet that the Prowler he was on suffered major damage from a Banshee that had gotten too close. The Captain had been knocked out and Will, with the rank of Commander had automatically been given de-facto command. He had given the order to evacuate the ship and try and put themselves in friendly controlled space.

They had been forced to evacuate the bridge when a Corvette had engaged the Prowler and caused a depressurization of the Bridge and caused serious damage to it rendering it unable to have Cole Protocol enacted. He had successfully evacuated all on board but when the then Captain Del Rio had re-awoken from his knocked out state he had immediately exercised emergency power granted to him through protocol as the leading individual and had promptly chided him and demoted him. When he had pleaded his case later in an actual court setting he hadn't been able to prove his case. It was a week later when his team had vanished with the exception of Chelsea and him and the Captain re-instated as an Admiral.

"Thank you Admiral Tchkova." said Will after a moment trying to mask his feelings presently. He ignored the next few words he said trying to shove out his bitter anger

They shook hands and parted.

The room was now full of enough heads of Military to make it look like its own Allied Species summit.

Will picked out Chelsea from the group and stood a little bit, slightly bored.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"Doesn't matter, just to be careful and to take the higher road." he said.

Chelsea backed off and the two just stood there for a moment.

"How did they infiltrate us?" asked Chelsea suddenly asking the question everybody had been asking.

"No idea, my guess would be that somehow in the confusion of organizing a fleet another group took advantage and stole along."

The lights dimmed in the conference room. And the figure of the Arbiter appeared as the rest of the group of Captains, Shipmasters, Fleetmasters, and Admirals took a seat or watched from a video link, their faces displayed on a large holographic board on the top of the curved walls.

Tired, weary, but mostly angry were the words that came to mind when describing them. He may have looked calm on the outside but his face showed nothing but anger held back by whatever constraints.

"Welcome. This meeting has been called to address a single question that has scourged us as worse as the Parasite did." he turned and slammed his gloved fist on the wide holotable making the image blur

slightly for a moment before coming back into focus.

"HOW did the Storm infiltrate us and put our entire future here in this galaxy in dire straits?!" he thundered.

When no one spoke he spoke up again.

"Because of them we stand innocent and taking the blame for the attack from the Republic. This entire...attempt to make ourselves seem more formidable and a challenger to any attempt of theirs to take our sovereignty has been made in vain. We lost brothers and sisters in a dishonorable attempt to disorient and confuse us that has left us with the sin of a planet reeling from being glassed." he stopped.

"An INCIDENT!" he roared slamming his fist down again, "that shouldn't have occurred at all if we had been vigilant! An instance where they have been able to glean information! Maps! Charts! And now data to which the UNSC has sought with the support of the Allied Species! Which is why I ask again." his voice becoming dangerously quiet. "How did they infiltrate so many into our ranks?"

"I believe I can answer that question." was Rtas 'Vadum's reply as he strode in accompanied by an Ultra and Two Zealots.

"Finally. Some answers. Let's hear them." the Arbiter huffed impatiently.

"Xyos 'Chevam," he said gesturing to the Ultra, "was on patrol seeking for more of the traitors when he obtained a prisoner.

"And did you find out anything?" asked the Arbiter careful to control his voice.

"Arbiter," said the Ultra bowing on one knee before rising. "My team and I found a prisoner while scouting and before he was silenced by a Storm kill team he told me that a spy was in our midst and planted on this ship. This traitor is in a position where he was able to manipulate events so that they were able to be absorbed into our fleet without a second thought."

"That would certainly explain a lot." Chelsea spoke to Will over a private link.

"Agreed. We should be trying to chase them! Not sitting here waiting while they slip between our fingers."

"Will, you realize if we were to just leave the Republic wouldn't think to kindly of us. I'd rather not tick off a vastly superior civilization with the capability of creating system armies in a months time."

><em>

"We wouldn't have to leave all, just send a smaller force out to seek out and destroy-"

"Will, the planet's already seeking murder anyways! We would be giving them a reason to-!"

"The longer we wait the more danger Asher and the others are put

in!"\_

\_"Excessively high levels of aggression detected in Spartan Will. I would recommend immediate action to calm yourself down." \_said Sarah interrupting them suddenly.

Will clenched his fist and let go of the pent up anxiety he was feeling after a moment.

"So what do we do know?" asked Lord Hood drawing his attention. "Admiral Osman, you had were briefing me earlier on data on the UNSC distress signals?"

The Turkish woman stood up and striding to the middle of the holographic table brought up a map of the Andromeda Galaxy.

"As most of you should know by now when the Storm attacked they also made a raid on a lab where the Republic was working on crunching the data necessary to pinpoint where the location of the distress signals was. They were attacked and the Republic was forced to evacuate with an agent of ours and a squad of ODS's to retreat. The Storm ended up cornering one group and abducting one of the scientists with one of the two data modules. Our field agent was almost killed when the glassing started but she found the other scientists and retrieved the other module from another. Meanwhile Fleetmaster 'Vadum managed to secure the location of one the vessels through usage of a Sentinel Probe. By combining that with the data recovered from our agent..."

A large blip appeared on the map of the galaxy. In a region labelled as Wild Space.

"The Storm stopped moving here and their movement patterns suggest that of orbit."

The room got quiet again as they all digested the information presented.

"So when do we leave?" asked Captain Thomas Lasky from a video link aboard the Infinity.

"-actually I was hoping you all would ask that." said another voice.

All eyes aboard snapped to the person speaking with a mixed degree of shock, anger, and annoyance.

The Supreme Chancellor stepped through the doors followed by two of his Bodyguards in their blood red garb.

"Chancellor." The Arbiter spoke silencing the room suddenly. "To what do we owe this great pleasure." he was not amused.

"Please Arbiter, I come in peace, lower your guards weapons."

Will and Chelsea reluctantly lowered their weapons trained on the head of the Chancellor along with the scattered guards from the Allied Species.

\_"Where the \*\*\*\* did he come from?" \_Chelsea asked he strode

in.

Across the room Majestic and Palmer did the same.

"Please, Arbiter, Lord Hood, I'm asking you. Why do you plan on leaving?"

"It is none of your concern-"

"Arbiter, do you forget so soon I have a scientist missing because of the attack on the Planet today? Surely this makes it just as much my problem as yours. Is it wrong that I try and reclaim her?"

"No it is honorable that you would however-"

"So why hold in this in secrecy? Are you attempting to just walk out on a Alliance just made?"

"Chancellor, with all respect due to you, we were in a Alliance that specified only assistance against the Confederacy. This is a matter entirely that doesn't belong to you. We are only here to reclaim two ships that have sent out distress signals. We are not here for your civil war, we are not here for you to tell us what to do. Last time I checked the Allied Species was of its own sovereignty, and not a possession to eyed at by others."

"While that may be true the Senate, and the citizenry are not guaranteed to see the way you do. The very fact that we possess Forerunner artifacts in our galaxy means that we are just as entitled to research them, study them, make use of them and therefore profit from them. They are not simply yours and yours alone. A position like that would only enforce the label of barbarians that has been placed upon you. And frankly, Terrence-"

The head of the UNSC bristled upon the Chancellor addressing him by name.

"-the Senate's overall position on Barbarians is that they be educated."

The Conference room reeled with that statement.

"Order!" yelled the Arbiter.

"Do you suppose that the Republic would be glad to go to war against us?! Don't you have any control?" asked Admiral Tchкова angrily once the room had silenced.

"Admiral, let me explain. If the Senate were to decide they want to go to war I could only do so much by myself. If I were to alienate myself from the Senate another would take my place, eager for blood. I have no intentions on declaring any sort of war on you. If you hadn't noticed we're still gridlocked with the Confederacy."

"Chancellor." said the Arbiter, "What even do you desire from helping us? How do we know this isn't a attempt at absorption?"

"I seek only to regain personal belonging to the Republic and the scientific advancement from studying a Civilization much more

powerful than any of us."

The room sat in silence again.

"It seems-" Rtas 'Vadum began, "that we were wrong to not inform you. I see no problem in you accompanying under strict rules about how you handle anything remotely Forerunner. I will admit that however much I dislike this it seems...necessary."

"Does anybody else concur with Fleetmaster 'Vadum?" asked the Arbiter wearily.

Slowly the room raised their hands one by one.

"Unbelievable. Did we really just give into his ultimatum?" \_Will asked new frustration pouring in.

"Will, I think you need a break. When you're of a sound mind talk to me. Find Ripa if you're that concerned about things. The way I see it for the moment we're being helped in avoiding another conflict, simple. And the others are agreeing in it.\_\_"\_

She ignored his response and he winked an apology with signal lights as he paid attention to the rest of the meeting.

"Chancellor, are we done here?" asked Admiral Osman bluntly.

"Why yes Admiral. I just came here to figure out what you were up to and give you an invitation to accept Republic aid and prevent a war between the two of us."

"Please understand we are leaving as soon as possible. Lives depend on it as you oh-so-carefully pointed out." a Sangheili Shipmaster said over the video link not bothering to hide his anger with the Chancellor.

He pointedly ignored it and acknowledged saying that would be fine with him.

Wishing them luck he left with his entourage.

"The nerve of him, we've been succored!" an Elite said voicing his displeasure.

"Seeing as we have been forced to accept his help I think we can use a mid-sized taskforce correct?" asked Lord Hood to the general gathering.

"We do not need to take everything with us. I suggest the Supercarrier stays behind until we can figure out who slipped Storm forces in the midst of us." the Arbiter asked.

A general mutter of agreement was his response.

"I propose the Shadow of Intent and her escort fleet be sent." Rtas said.

The Arbiter quickly agreed to it and within another minute the Infinity and her escort fleet and the Dauntless had all been selected to go along.

"Arbiter, I assume you will take control of the Sangheili crewed ships?" asked Lord Hood.

"No, I shall remain behind to deal with our spy. Rtas is more than up to the task. Lord Hood will command the Human Ships?"

"I will. Admiral Peterson can be in charge of the ones left behind."

"How soon are we leaving Arbiter?" asked Fleetmaster 'Valam via another video link with his trademark coldness.

"As soon as possible. The Storm have enough of an advantage. If no other comments are to be made let us break and mobilize."

The meeting done with Will hurriedly left for a shuttle to the Dauntless determining not to stop for anybody until he was on board. He paused to look for Ripa but he was still not among any of the crowd that was departing.

As he entered the hangar the two way shields were being energized and with a pop flared to life as the storm outside grew more intense and blackened the sky with lightning flashing and crackling outside in what seemed like a continuous loop. It was most intense over the crater where the heat was fueling the storm in its intensity. Coruscant would have a hard time sleeping.

The Pelican ride thankfully wasn't eventful as he entered the massive hangar again. The Frigates Saratoga and Yorktown latched and clamped in place again and the ship was being readied to leave atmosphere.

He headed for his own quarters adjacent to the still empty S-Deck where he had removed his armor leaving him only in the black under suit all Spartans now wore. As he mentally reviewed the day he was soured by his attitude at the events going on. Deciding he needed a break he grabbed a towel and left for the gym. For once it was empty and the now cavernous space held him and a few others. He selected a punching bag in the far corner designed for Spartan use.

William walked up to it sizing it up. Then suddenly he was throwing a punch to the left that jolted it and filled the gym with a reverberating \_CRACK!\_ Not satisfied he took another swing that jerked it again. And as he thought of a hundred different wrongs that had occurred he suddenly seized a burst of energy and as fast as he could he slugged it again and again his body releasing every bit of anger and frustration it possessed.

The Storm-\_Crack!\_

Del Rio-\_Crack!\_

His demotion-\_Crack!\_

His helplessness to stop events from happening-\_Crack!\_

His cowardice towards his family-\_CRACK!\_

Suddenly he was filled with the images of the past racing at near



impossible speeds as he sped up his punching. He is no longer conscious of breathing. His heartbeat is that of his fists beating relentlessly on the toughened bag, the images that would not die.

Only images are what he can see now, a field near Azod, New Alexandria, his team, a wall of fire, Reach, Tribute, the Skirmisher that killed a teammate, the burned body of one of his teammates, burning warthogs strewn everywhere, screams, a bunker, an explosion of light and heat, a hundred Elites bearing down on one Spartan.

\_Asher\_

And suddenly something in Will snapped and didn't care anymore as he sought to beat the living daylights out of this bag. No longer conscious of any thought everything groan and crack the bag makes is the one word repeated over and over.

It repeats faster now. Images of childhood, a piano, a concert hall, an explosion tearing through the ceiling, shattered glass, broken pavement, an Elite standing over with a glowing sword with its ghostly contrail, sheltering another from the blade, a grasp of the hand.

\_"Promise you'll find me?"\_

\_"...of course. I don't break them do I?"  
><em>

And suddenly in a flash of color that makes him nauseous Will found himself standing in front of the bag. Presently as his vision returned to normal and he was conscious of breathing he found, with a start of surprise his hand had punched a hole through the toughened and reinforced kevlar shell of the bag its sand filled insides spilling out softly.

With a jerk of shock he removes it sending a faster trickle of its filling out before stopping.

A drop of blood hits his face.

Looking down Will was surprised to see his hands, clenched, trembling, and bleeding.

His face feels odd. And he is surprised when a stinging feeling causes them to water. With another dull shock the tear falls to the ground. Oddly silent, yet loud and powerful.

He looks around to see the few others there watching him in a mixture of shock and awe.

\_"What's going on with me?!" \_Will asked over and over in his mind as he reels from this. He was a Spartan, Spartans didn't lose control! They didn't go insane! Yet here he was with a bag punched through and his hands bloodied from beating it so hard. Was he mad? Insane? His life condemned to an asylum?

Will started running. He had to get away! Had to get away before he hurt someone else! Something, anything!

He was running through the corridor. Running, faster, harder, and he realizes he's going to fast as a trolly laden with munitions stops in front of him.

Will yells a warning out and someone heeds it running out of the way before he smashes into it at full speed.

\* \* \*

><p><em>So what did you guys think? I wanted to give Will a little more of a darker side to explore. I think everybody has one. I mean nobody is without faults, which of course will be revealed and resolved in due time. Thanks for your time in reading this and if you're curious about what else I've been up to feel free to check out <strong>Discovery: Or a Foxes Tale<strong>; my newest project for the enjoyment of the public. \_

\_So to recap this quickly we have the Storm in retreat and now in orbit around a unknown planet, we meet a renegade Skirmisher, We learn of Palpatine's darker agenda and hear a moving piece of oration, Del Rio is revealed to be an idiot once again and we are left with Will in a confused and somewhat delirious state. I apologize for the cliffhanger but all good things come to those who wait. Oh, and did you guys like the little RvB easter egg? I'll I'm going to say is Project Freelancer will become important at some point.  
><em>

\_ And no, before any of you comment I am not planning on making him go rogue or insane. \_

\_Reviews are welcome! No flames. \_

\_Yours in writing  
><em>

\_theotherpianist\_

## 11. Chapter 11

\_Hi, \*\*theotherpianist \*\*is back with a filler chapter this time. I left some loose ends with Will the last chapter that I wished to tie up. Chapter 12 will be a long chapter because stuff's going down on the planet. I lost inspiration and until I regain it this will have to suffice for now. \_

\_I would like to take this moment and thank those who responded to the letter to the attackers of MH17 (now removed). All I wished to do was express my anger at the time. Was it overly aggressive? \_

\_Sure it was, I fully admit that and I apologize for any offense. This wasn't targeting any one specific as far as nationality as some of accused me of doing. I was addressing the people who one side or the other pushed the button without regards to what country they hailed from or what political view they held.\_

\_ As far as the debate that started to unfold I had to delete a lot of the harsher messages going of people who were going back at each

other. Guys, this isn't a debate site. This is a place for writers and I chose to write something expressing my feeling to the wider world.\_

And lets move on to selected reviews,

\_\*\*scottusal:\*\*\_I've addressed that in this chapter. Don't worry.\_

\*\*\_cro42:\*\*\_I'm playing around with both ideas. Not sure how its going to turn out. \_

\_And to my \*\*FavGuest: \*\*Yes, it was a little rushed because I wanted to portray what was going on in Will's mind. It was a gamble but I'm satisfied with it. \_

\*\*\*Before we begin I must make note that part of this chapter was influenced by Matthew Stover's novelization of Revenge of the Sith. My argument for using this is because the books are canon that inherently to me makes it canon and therefore FanFiction friendly.\* \*\*

\_Without further ado,  
><em>

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 11<p>

\*\*Southwest Tower, Jedi Temple\*\*

\*\*Coruscant\*\*

\*\*Half-hour after Allied Species depart, approx 22:30  
><strong>

As the trio of Jedi entered the base of the tower with its spire stretching and clawing for the sky and emerged through the threshold of the center room they turned right. Tired, weary, the rigors of the events before hand had caught up with them. It had been a day that tried even the most patient of the Jedi. As she looked over Obi-Wan wore a slight scowl. Through the force Anakin's impatience and frustration bled through, a wound that was affecting them all.

As they crossed into a repulsorlift shaft the door closed behind them and the lift shot up to the top level where they had been requested. It stopped and Ahsoka massaged a injured shoulder sub-consciously.

The Council Room sat in silence as the figures of three Jedi appeared. Through the door of the elevator as they all stepped out Ahsoka Tano could feel the gloomy mood throughout the chamber, a palpable feeling reciprocated and shared by all. Since the attack the three of them had been split up hunting parties of the Storm that sought refuge among the underworld of the Planet. It had been a task that was made even harder by the Sangheili's ability to cloak built into their armor.

What had started as a ruse by a Swoop Gang to put the three Jedi into a trap had actually turned for the worst when a group of the

genocidal fanatics had ambushed them all. They had barely made it out without injury and Ahsoka mentally beat her self up over the event as she chastised her self and her lack of being in harmony with the Force.

"Welcome you three we do." said Grandmaster Yoda.

"We do not have much time here." the figure of Mace Windu sat up looking the three of them in the eye. "-you can deliver your report later but for now we have an assignment for the three of you."

"Left the Allied Species has. In pursuit of their attackers they are currently. Moved the Chancellor has to secure our involvement with them due to a captured scientist."

"He has given Admiral Tarkin the task of gathering a fleet. He has requested that you three accompany him as detachments of the 501st and 212th Battalion have been conscripted to join." Windu said.

"When would we leave?" asked Kenobi simply.

"You should all prepare to leave within a few hours." said Shaak Ti.

"Master Windu and I shall conduct operation on land and in space respectively." interjected Plo Koon.

"What about the Outer Rim? What are we going to do with the sieges we have currently in place?" asked Anakin.

\_"Others will take your place for the time. Thanks to your efforts we can afford to send you three for the duration of the events." \_said a holoscan of Kit Fisto.

"Masters, I'm sorry to ask but where exactly are we headed? All you've said is we are to be on a fleet. Are we headed anywhere? A planet?" asked Ahsoka.

"Excellent question you have Padawan. Master Windu?"

"The Chancellor reports that the Allied Species are and were here for only two things. One is two distress signals coming from a planet in Wild Space. Unfortunately it is one that we've never seen before on any of our charts and maps. You should all prepare yourselves for anything unexpected as our lack of intelligence is rather unfortunate. Secondly, this planet is purported to be of Forerunner origin, of which the Allied Species believe were the shapers of life. They are going to establish a presence on the planet to study its purpose. Our task as dictated by the Chancellor," he said his name a little tighter than the rest of what he spoke, "-is to secure a research base on the planet so that we may do similar."

"And they're okay with this?" asked Ahsoka again.

"To the contrary little 'Soka." said Master Plo Koon, "-the Allied Species are furious and believe that the Chancellor, in essence, forced his way on the ship."

"And they're furious in the light of having their own problems with

this Storm becoming ours?! Look at the planet, we lost how many innocent lives again? How many Jedi have we lost in pursuit of them!" Anakin said raising his voice.

"Can we blame them while we stand guilty as well?"\_ asked Master Fisto.

"Peace."\_ said Ki-Adi-Mundi calming the group down from a bunker on Mygeeto far away.

"Calm yourself Skywalker." Yoda said.

"I apologize Masters." he said with a bow after a moment looking somewhat ashamed.

"Surprise they were to us. Caught off guard were we, an effort to be vigilant we must make." Yoda said.

"Are they going to be aggressive towards us?" asked Kenobi.

"We don't anticipate it, however tensions are between us. Which is why we are sending you three along as well. You three are the only Jedi the Allied Species have had contact with before all of this. We ask you three to use your training and skill and attempt to calm tensions down. The last thing any of us need is another war." said Master Windu.

"We shall do as you have asked." said Kenobi.

"Report to Staging Facility 35 when you are ready. And may the force be with you." said the Korun Jedi Master.

"And with you." the trio said before stepping out.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Dauntless Class Battleship (DBD-312): UNSC Dauntless<strong>

\*\*Slipspace Transition: 45 minutes to exit  
><strong>

Will woke with a start before hearing someone ease him down gently with a gloved fist. He looked up and squinting to adjust to the fluorescent lights overhead was greeted by Ripa with the Sangheili equivalent of a smile. He was in a small room with the door open to the ships infirmary. He glanced over and saw his Spartan bodysuit hanging up on the wall.

"You're a sight sorely missed. Will said grimacing as he felt a soreness flowing down from the top of his head and down to his feet where it seemed to radiate out like some sick fever. The last time he had felt this horrible was after augmentation.

"You had my worried brother. The Ship's AI alerted me that you were suffering a breakdown of some sort. You did a number on that punching bag as well."

William shook his bandaged hands and grimaced.

"Where were you?"

"After the Storm stopped their attack on the Senate I was drafted into a group of SpecOps soldiers assigned to clearing out a building they were holed up in."

"Sounds fun. You look like you did just fine." he said looking at a burn mark on one of his shoulder plates. "What happened to me?" he asked after a minute lifting himself up to see Ripa more clearly. "I've never had that happen to me before."

"Besides having an ordinance crate knock you out no." admitted Ripa.

"That would be for me to answer Spartan." said another voice.

He looked over to see a shorter squat man with short black haired man of Australian descent dressed in a white doctors lab-coat. One of the ships newer crew members he guessed as he hadn't seen him before.

"Excuse me, I have to speak with him privately now." he said to Ripa.

He bowed his head and left the room ducking to pass through the doorway.

"So have I gone insane?" Will asked casually. He might have been asking for a weather report.

The doctor gave him a hard look. "No Will, not yet at least. We were going to diagnose you with PTSD and ship you back home to a mental center but that was before I suggested that we run a few tests on your chemical and hormonal balance because you are a Spartan after all with an entirely different makeup than your average ODST."

"And Doctor Taft?" Will said looking at his nametag.

"We discovered that your body started to reject the drugs that affected your mental processes, cognition, analysis, your ability to think clearly-they were all affected. Something caused; mostly likely the high stress physical, emotional, and mental levels you recently endured on Rhen Var; created a flux of different chemical reactions from all the different levels of hormones that essentially flooded your body that started shutting you down bit by bit and putting your aggression levels at dangerous levels."

Noting that Will was trying to follow he said simply, "Your body was essentially having an allergic reaction to your augmentation, just incredibly delayed."

"So what did you do then? I mean that doesn't sound like a good thing to just leave around."

"We decided the best thing to do after much consideration would be replace the chemicals used in augmentation and redo that process in an effort to stabilize you. It worked thankfully and your body seems to have built up a resistance to whatever happened to destabilize you."

Will noticed the way he was phrasing it, "This was the first time you've seen this?"

He nodded, "-in theory we knew this could happen but we have never seen this before in an individual. You were a groundbreaking case. As a first case I'm going to ask that you wear a chip that will let us monitor your vitals, for scientific purposes only for the next 24 hours. It will become defunct at that point.

"What is it going to be stuck into me?"

"No, we're implanting it on your armor right now."

"And we're all done. Enjoy your nap?" a flash of blue light and the avatar of Sarah appeared contemplating the Spartan with amusement.

"So...are there any limitations? I assume then you're allowing me to go into combat because of the armor?"

"There aren't any major ones that I can think off. The only concern I have is that you don't put yourself in a situation like Rhen Var where the amount of stress and stressors you had almost broke you. And please, try to restrain yourself from punching holes through kevlar." he said with a smile "-that wasn't a pretty mess to clean up on your hands. You have been deemed combat ready. Please try and keep yourself that way. If any complications appear we will call you back to help fix any unforeseen effect. You may have some slight nausea for an hour or two while your body reprocesses the drugs."

"Thank you Doctor." he said getting to his feet.

"Thank you Spartan, you've made medical history." he shook his hand and left while Will grabbed his Spartan bodysuit and changed out of some disposable hospital clothes in a bathroom. He exited feeling less exposed with his second skin and headed outside.

"Hey!"

He stopped and turned to see Chelsea in her own bodysuit running towards him.

"I just wanted to apologize for what I said earlier! When I found out you were hospitalized I regretted it instantly and...well, I'm sorry okay?"

She stepped back in parade rest.

"There's no need to apologize, Doctor said it was all the things that happened on Rhen Var finally catching up. I'm all good to go now and I feel great.

She eyed his hands and gave a nod.

"Uh-huh?"

"No actually my hands feel like crap and I feel like day six after augmentation." he said as he flexed his still bandaged hands. He wouldn't be punching anything for a little bit. They both laughed at the joke and were interrupted by the Ship's AI.

\_"Spartan Gunther please report to the Bridge."\_ Elsa, the dumb AI aboard the ship spoke across the PA system. Will wondered off-hand whether it had been changed recently. It now was a lot more lower in pitch and almost reminded him of one of the Superintendents of a generic city.

He boarded the tram system that spanned the ship after a quick parting with Chelsea and stepped off at the Bridge station.

Entering the space he picked out Admiral Tchkova standing hunched over the Command Board.

He turned when the First Officer pointed to Will and stood up.

"Good, you're here. How are you Spartan?"

"Doctor has cleared me for combat. It was just a combination of high-stress causing allergic reactions."

"Glad to hear it. You and Chelsea are going to be one of the first dropped on the planet. Your mission will be two fold. As Sarah is our resident expert on anything Forerunner she will be accompanying you to the surface. Protect her so she can give us a little more information about what exactly this place is. There isn't any problem with that?"

"No sir. She was our team's AI, there shouldn't be any problems."

"Good, your second mission is to try and figure out where our ships have crash landed and recover any personal. You will likely be facing the Storm and potentially Prometheans should they be on this planet. Sentinels are likely to be expected but they shouldn't bother you. As for any Flood it's hard to say. Report any signs of infestation at once should you find any."

"How are we being deployed?"

"A Falcon will airdrop you two with a Warthog for transportation. After that point it will be your discretion as to where you go as long as you find the location. If someone else finds it your new goal will be to immediately secure the area for setting up a base of operations. As you know the Republic under the Chancellor forced his way into our parade. Please inform the Clones they aren't to touch anything if there is anything to touch. We don't know what this Planet is other than Forerunner so expect anything. Your orders are subject to change while you are on the ground. Keep an ear out for any developments."

"Sounds doable."

"Right then, report to the armory and then to the main hangar and get yourself set for a HALO jump. We exit Slipspace in thirty minutes."

Will saluted and the Admiral returned to the board.

He stepped pass a trio of Jackals on his way to the tram and boarded



it with a couple of Grunts heaving a plasma cannon through the door to one of the forward hangars where the Phantoms were kept.

The tram stopped and they got off heaving it below to the deck. The doors closed and it sped along its track. A couple of ODST's got on chattering about their assignment. One of them was complaining about his leisure time being cut short.

The tram stopped at the armory where he got off and a host of other soldiers and sailors, Human and non, boarded each carrying their own weapons.

The armory was buzzing as it usually was before any combat mission. In the back corner two forges worked making munitions for the ship and soliders. He walked past a dozen Unngoy all outfitted with weaponry which upon seeing him gave him plenty of space to pass through. Turning another corner two Jackals were outfitting themselves with their iconic shields and Needlers. The gave a gesture of greeting which Will returned.

Walking past the section devoted to the other Allied Species members he stopped at the end of a corridor now walking past rows of Misirah Armories trademark assortment of Battle Rifles, DMR's, a rack full of gleaming SRS Snipers, M7 Submachine Guns, M6 Pistols and Magnums, Assault Rifles polished and gleaming with barrels glistening in the fluorescent lighting, Launchers of grenades and rockets, Spartan Lasers. He bet that if he were to sell all of it at full price he could easily buy himself another ship the size of the Dauntless.

A section completely devoted to Armor was passed before he walked to the back where a sign warned for **\*\*Spartan Usage Only\*\*\_\*\*.\*\* \_**He walked past it and suddenly was in the S-Deck.

He walked to where a group of technicians was motioning over to one of the giant ringlike machines that put his armor on. And in seconds was sealed up in the familiar and friendly cocoon that was his armor. Next to the machine stood two lockers. One for him, the other one for the next ring over.

Punching in the combination he opened the door which swung outwards gently. Inside holstered on a rack were the two M6's he always used. Picking them up he placed them on his legs and on one of the pouches of the Commando chest piece placed all the ammo for the weapons inside. Sealing them inside he picked up a duffel bag that he hadn't used for quite a while. Opening it up on the table in between the locker and the ring he removed from it a weapon that hadn't seen the light of day for several years.

Even without having been used it still was in prime firing condition. The light of the S-Deck gleaming off the words **\*\*FNH FS2000 Tactical\*\***.

The weapon had only ever been used on assignments with all of Castle Team. Now today as he removed it and racked the bolt he felt a sense of calm flood over him. One way or another today he would find them.

It was a shorter weapon that benefited in MOUT situations but in the service of William the weapon had been heavily modified for usage anywhere. It no longer fired the 5.56x45mm NATO rounds but rather the

same ones that the Battle Rifle utilized so well, the 9.5x40mm M634 Experimental High-Powered Semi-Armor-Piercing round. It added on another half pound to the weapon and it was three quarters of an inch longer than its non-modified state.

He secured the magazines to his person and removed several attachments. One was a special purpose red dot scope manufactured by Acheron Security for Spartan Operatives that had variable zooms of 1x, 2.5x, and 5x that in addition had a thermal band laced into it for usage in identifying targets in low light conditions. The scope changes functioned via usage of a series of small buttons that could be reached by hands as they aimed the weapon. Underneath it one could look down and see the iron sights below through a small gap.

Satisfied that the Acheron sight was centered after a quick scan with his helmet he quickly attached a flashlight to the underneath of it. He removed the laser pointer sight that had been put on the side and he zipped the duffel bag up. Opening up the second he glanced at a small faded label with the words CASTLE TWO.

He reached down and removed a duffel bag sitting on the bottom. This one was a newer weapon dating back to the 21st Century, a German made M27. Picked up by its owner on a mission on Mamore. They had recovered it from an old armory they had found and had subjected it to the same degree of modification as he had with his own "personal" weapon. Having a Huragok on board helped a lot when trying to modify anything.

This weapon had been expanded to accommodate the M118 Full Metal Jacket Armor-Piercing 7.62x51mm rifle ammunition used extensively by the UNSC in almost all automatic and semi automatic weapons to great effect. Underneath like the Belgian rifle now attached to his back it possessed a flashlight attached to the bottom. A rubberized hand grip lay behind to aid in holding the weapon. It possessed the same sight attached to the FS 2000 and an additional laser pointer sight to aid in firing from the hip. The forward iron sights were flipped down currently to allow the specialty sight to be used while the rear remained to aid additionally in aiming. Grabbing the ammo clips and storing them on his person as well he traded the M27 for the FS and he strode into the armory to top off on grenades and ammo.

It took him a minute as the line was steadily expanding but the Quartermaster came out and yelled for the Marines and Navy Sailors currently arming themselves to let him go first.

Thanking him quickly he left now at least twenty pounds heavier. Another short ride on the tram brought him to the main hangar where he found the Falcon mentioned earlier. The Gunship was being readied for atmospheric flight from the inevitable occasion the Dauntless would descend through the skies to provide ground support. The two Marines checking the side mounted guns gave him a salute and he looked for an found the Pilot. A young but serious looking Army Air Force Pilot.

"Pilot." he said to the hunched figure with his back to him.

He turned around and paled when he saw the Spartan loaded down with an immense amount of weaponry and bullets.

"Geez, you startled me!"

They both shared a laugh as the pilot blushed nervously.

"What's going on?" asked Chelsea as she peered around the open cockpit of the Gunship.

"Spartan darn near scared the crap out of me!" confessed the Pilot.

"Sorry I missed it. You ready to fly us in?" asked Chelsea.

"Ready as I'll ever be. I'm going to attach the Warthog to the bottom via hardpoint and we should be good to go.

"Spartan?" Sarah's avatar flashed to life at a nearby terminal.  
"Aren't you forgetting something?"

Will kicked himself mentally and retrieved the AI and sliding the storage unit holding the AI into the back of the helmet. Registering the cool mercury feeling he shared some brief small talk before turning towards Chelsea.

She was staring at his choice of weaponry.

"So...you really think today you'll find them?" she asked.

"I know I'll find them."

"If I weren't your teammate I'd be making a joke of how this would belong in some twisted romance story."

"And if you weren't a friend I'd get Sarah to make your life miserable."

"That wouldn't be too hard actually. You know a one minute shower is pretty feasible..." \_the AI said with a smirk.

"Uh huh." said Chelsea feigning terror and attentiveness.

\_Attention all hands. Exiting Slispace in Five Minutes. All personal report to Battle Stations. \_Elsa said over the PA system.

They turned to hear a whirring sound. Across the bay the Yorktown and Saratoga were being readied for launch and the numerous fighters stationed on board started spinning up their engines. Across the bay Broadwords, Longswords, and a few Sabres made ready to launch as soon as they exited.

The Falcon they were to board attached to a crane where a team of Marines attached the Warthog and a large parachute to it from underneath. A platform extended to encompass the vehicle and provide a ramp for the passengers to board.

The ship hummed and exited slipspace with a flash of light through the now lowering blast doors. The shields of the bay energized and glowed blue as they dropped completely and immediately a roar filled the bay as dozens of fighters lit their engines and sped out the soldiers on the ground hastening out of their way.

From a different corner the howl of Seraphs was audible as they ignited their drives and sped out.

"This is Admiral Tchkova to all Dauntless personal, reading multiple light cruisers and fighter craft. All fighters engage and keep them busy. Dauntless is going loud." \_the Admiral spoke from the bridge.

A dull thump shook the ship as the MAC cannon sent one of its trademark lethal rounds towards an unseen enemy.

"All hands prepare for ground operations when we clear a hole through their blockade. You all have come here in the name of saving your friends and comrades who are in distress. Today we will find and reclaim them from the storm and you will make history as the first UNSC troops to land on the first Forerunner Planet found since Requiem. Good luck soldiers. Tchkova out."\_

WARNING FRIGATE LAUNCH SEQUENCE ENGAGED! Eliza said. Will looked over to see the Yorktown and Saratoga detached from two massive docking clamps that kept them horizontal. They dropped down and out of the massive bay doors that quickly sealed themselves up.

The main hangar suddenly became quieter as the roar of fighters vanished as they all left. The Dauntless turned and the ship shook as the MAC fired.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>500 Republica, Senatorial  
Apartments<strong>

\*\*Coruscant: 23:00 hours\*\*

As a speeder flew through the night sky and docked at one of its many tethers for traffic and those privileged enough to live here, at the most exclusive place to live in the Senatorial District of Coruscant, the night was finally settling down.

He walked through the door separating the landing deck from the Apartments and walked through the familiar corridors. Taking a turbolift up he stopped at a certain floor and knocked three times with his mechanical hand.

The building was home to the most wealthy, influential, and prominent individuals and as such was treated as such. The Separatists and the lower class had since the beginning of the war used as a symbol of the extra-ordinate wealth of the Coruscant elite, an excuse and a call for Justice. Indeed the building was so exclusive that it was often the subject of many back hand dealings and assassinations of its more shady members. To possess even its smallest apartment held its own kind of respect.

Its features also included its own power grid to supply the building with all the power it needed to function and sustain all the parties, functions, and other gatherings it hosted on any night. It had a security staff to rival that of the Senate and possessed its own self defense grid built into it to protect from invasion.

Workers were even now securing it But he had only a mind for one

individual this night.

He waited, paused to collect himself and tousle his hair into place before the door opened.

"Ani?" came the tired voice of his wife. Senator Padme Amidala.

"Hey, I'm sorry to disturb you." he said still standing outside.

"What's wrong?" she asked him softly her tired face looking back into his equally tired eyes.

"Something's come up. The Chancellor and Jedi Council have requested that I go on another mission..."

He watched her face fall slightly but she put her Politician Look and face on and pretended to be neutral about it. He could feel her hurt though through the force.

"Not again! How could they?" \_he felt her silent plea rise and fall.

"Where are they asking you to go now? The Outer Rim?" she asked concealing her hurt.

"No in fact. I'm headed to Wild Space. It would appear some of the Allied Species have left in an attempt to chase after the Storm who appear to be in orbit around an uncharted planet. I know I know," he said at her confused face. "The Council is looking into why it's unknown. The fact of the matter is since I'm one of the three Jedi who know them the best we're leaving to help ease some of the tension between the us and them."

"But so soon my love?" she asked with a slight plea.

"Believe me, I'd rather be here than chasing barbarians and pirates."

Amidala looked as though she wanted to defend the Allied Species but she stopped.

"Please. Be careful Ani."

"I will."

They both leaned in together beyond the door and eye of the Security Cameras before they kissed for a moment and then left.

He heard the door close behind him and he turned and walked away heading for the Speeder. A soft touch of the force started it as he advanced and as he stepped out into the windswept and dark night and turned it off in the direction of the Militarized portion of Coruscant. He had a little bit to go and after a quick word to his Padawan and Kenobi about his time of arrival he sat back and let the force do the driving.

He was tired beyond belief. One hard campaign after another in the Outer Rim, loss after loss, victories darkened with the enormous cost

of men and materials.

It was so easy to see why the Allied Species seemed to be scrambling to retreat after meeting them. He didn't blame them. In a galaxy that was so screwed up as to have the shadow of the war penetrate into every orifice of society...it was no wonder that the darkness sought to drag him down, no wonder that it was clawing at him.

And the dreams...for months consecutively he watched as his wife was tortured by some unknown foe. In his mind proclaiming to him her love. She was on an operating table of some sort. Pained, her teeth clenched and her hair damp curls and locks twitching as she writhed in agony. And the voices over and over...

\_"I'm sorry Anakin" \_

The fear that had been steadily gripping the galaxy in its greedy mouth was biting down harder and harder until it seemed like everything was about to shatter.

When he was little he had heard stories of the powerful Sun Dragons that lived in everything from Suns to the simple fusion reactor that powered a Pod-Racer. Beings that were worshiped long ago that provided the energy for the galaxy to move.

But Anakin had a different dragon living inside him. During the day he didn't feel it, the walls of his Jedi training and the Sun melting the frost on the walls of his heart was enough for him to keep his head clear and focus.

But sometimes at night the walls he had constructed started to freeze over and crack. And sometimes a dragon would slip through the narrowest of cracks and would chew at the very sinews of his heart. Whispering that he could never save her he had watched her die every night.

He didn't dare tell Obi-Wan. How could he? He would be kicked out of the Order...

Failure.

It was always the thought of it that drove him to endeavor to save her in her dreams. But more importantly by exile from the Order he would fail himself, his now dead mother, Padme, Obi-Wan, all their hopes and expectations ground into the dust, atomized,

The list went on and on.

\_"But she might die." \_whispered the Dragon.

An air taxi honked as he came a little close to it for comfort.

How could he save her? He felt powerless to do something-anything that could save her.

He put his hand over his face and grunted as a headache that had set in since he had saved the Allied Species. He didn't know what to think anymore. Between the arrival of humans from another \_galaxy\_ no less and the tension that had started to build between the Jedi and the Chancellor he didn't know what to think anymore. He was being

pulled in too many different directions.

Reaching out through the force he found Padme's touch fading away. She was now tense and worried. Through the force he sent a wave of comfort.

The illuminated lights of staging area 35 suddenly lit up the world as he turned around an enormous series of skyscrapers and approached it.

Parking the Speeder in a private and secure deck he made his way past the numerous Clone Security checkpoints flashing the lightsaber they let him through without a fuss. As dangerous as this may have been at the moment he didn't care. He made a note to remind to do security checks. A turbolift to the top of a large building with a ramp down into the bridge gave way to the figures of Obi-Wan and Ahsoka leaning over the railing.

"You've made it." said Obi-Wan. Masters Plo and Windu are already on board and in space."

"So I have. What's our status?" he asked looking over at the vast field of Venator and Acclamtor Class Warships.

Rows upon rows of clones were marching up the landing decks. Rows upon rows of Fighter Tanks and AT-TE's followed behind them.

"We have a few minutes until all are on board." said his Padawan looking over. She had forgotten her normal attire for something a little more covering and protective.

Anakin was forced to step back in time to when he was a Padawan for a moment. He was now reminded of himself when he was a Padawan, almost at the completion of her training. She had come a long way since that first meeting on Christophs.

"We...better get on board. Said Ahsoka after a moment snapping him out of nostalgia.

"Admiral Yularen is waiting for us to assume Command." said Obi-Wan.

He looked at his old master and stared at him for a second.

"So where is Admiral Tarkin?" he asked blearily trying to rub sleep from his eyes.

"In orbit I would imagine waiting for us to leave."

"Right then let's go greet the Admiral shall we?" letting some of his trademark cockiness back into his voice.

The trio stepped on the extended deck that led them down a long incline to an entrance hatch on the side of the twin bridge of the RSS Resolute. As they stepped aboard they found the Command Deck in motion in preparation for take-off procedures.

"Generals on deck!" said the Gold and white armored figure of Commander Cody snapping to a salute.

The uniform bridge crew snapped to salute at the appearance. The appearance of his astromech droid R2D2 running around brought him a small smile. He whistled as he saw him.

"Generals we are ready to join the others in space." Admiral Yularen said looking at a holoscan of their ship. "The last of the troops are on board."

"Take us into orbit." Obi-Wan ordered putting his hand across his beard in thought.

He turned to Anakin as the massive ships of the engine flared to life after a minute and the ship rose into the air.

"You look like you need some sleep. I can take over for the time being."

He muttered a word of thanks before turning out of the bridge and proceeding to his quarters.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC Infinity (INF-101)<strong>

\*\*In orbit around newly designated Forerunner planet "Yukon".

><strong>

\*\*December 9th, 2558: 6:00 hours

><strong>

Captain Thomas Lasky sat in thought looking over the position of the two fleets via hologram.

"Roland describe what I'm looking at." he asked looking at the fleet.

"Fleet pattern suggests a standard Covenant defense formation above the surface of the planet. However it won't be nearly as effective seeing as they seem to be fielding mostly light cruisers."

"And the planet Roland?"

The planet was covered in green with snow capped mountain ranges and regions running in jagged North to South patterns. Several inland seas dotted the planet's surface. One of the people made the comment that it looked like a massively blown up cross section of the Yukon territory in what used to be Canada and so the name had stuck.

"Yukon seems to have very similar properties to Earth and other habitable colony worlds. The Storm have landed their forces in the shadow of two mountains.

"And distress signals?"

"There is definitely something there Captain. Whether the Storm have moved to block it or not is beyond me. Right now its impossible to track."



Captain Lasky's brow furled in thought.

"We can't let them reach the beacons Roland." he said after a moment.

"Captain. Fleetmaster 'Vadum is ordering us to move into deployment position above Yukon's atmosphere." the ships AI Roland said.

"While he does what? Engage the rest of the fleet?" he asked.

"Yes actually, the Sangheili seem to have a pretty big bone to pick with them over what they did on Coruscant. In fact the Fleetmaster seems to be hailing you now."

Sure enough from communications the cry for the Captain to come over rang out over the ambiance of the bridge.

He walked over to a holoprojector and stood there. And within moments Rtas 'Vadum fizzled into view.

"Greetings Fleetmaster."

"And to you Captain."

"What do you wish to speak to me about?"

"This is a mission where there are UNSC personal involved. We feel like it would be wise to avoid contributing ground personal for the moment as we do not know from when they come from. The Sangheili Protectorate also has some unfinished business with the Storm. We will take action in space. We are more than fit to take on these cowards and additionally I feel it is only right that you have the honor with dealing with them where you are most comfortable, on the ground. I shall of course dispatch troops to help contain but I will put the bulk of my efforts in dealing with these cowards here. Are we understood Captain?"

Lasky took a moment to analyze what he had said. And despite other reservations he might have had the Fleetmaster was right. The Protectorate was more adept in space than the UNSC on ground and this was a mission to save UNSC personnel after all.

"Understood. Have you spoken with Admiral Tchkova?"

"I already have. He is devoting his Carriers and light Battleships to assisting us. The Dauntless will take the ground with a few other ships to ferry supplies."

A voice off screen asked for the Fleetmaster and after a moment of parting closed the connection.

The door behind him hissed open and he turned to see Spartan Sarah Palmer walking over to him suited up with armor save for her helmet.

"Commander Palmer." he said respectfully greeting the taller woman.  
"You set for combat?"

"All Fireteams are prepped and ready to go Captain. We're waiting for your orders."

"Thank you Commander." he stopped and put his hand on his chin.

"Yes Captain?" said Sarah anticipating the question.

"I seem to recall we are now missing a good dozen or so Spartans after Requiem-"

The Spartan Commander flinched noticeably.

"If you think I wanted to talk about the \*\*\*\* of a job I did than-"

"No Sarah, stand down. That's not what I wanted to discuss."

"Than what is it?" she asked impatiently.

"What did you think of the other Spartans, the two that worked with you and Fireteam Majestic?" he asked.

She stepped back a moment and thought for a moment taken back by the question.

"Honestly Tom, working with the Three's is a lot easier than working with the Four's to some extent with the exception of Crimson and to some additional degree Majestic."

"How so?" he asked. "I'm thinking of transferring some to the Infinity."

"What the rest of Blue Team and Gamma Company?" she probed.

"That doesn't matter. How are they easier?" he asked again.

"Well for one thing Tom, they're easily more professional than the Four's. I mean as much as I hate to say this they're still like the original's. Maybe a little less cold and silent but they're still almost the same."

"Would you be okay if I were to ask to transfer a few to here?" he asked.

The Spartan stopped realization dawning in her eyes.

"Wait a moment Captain." she said suddenly a lot more wary abandoning use of his first name.

"What Sarah?"

"You want to transfer the two Spartans I worked with on Coruscant to here? That's all fine and good but what about the leader, what was his name, Will? Technically he's outranked by the other Spartan and he was stripped of rank. I've heard enough talk from the higher ups that I'm not so sure about-"

"Sarah, take a moment to realize we are talking about Del Rio here for a moment when you talk about higher ups."

She stopped trying to formulate a counter-response immediately instead her lips forming a new question.

"Why him Tom? There are easily a good two doz-"

"Because I feel like Will and what's left of his team have an extraordinary amount of potential. They've been leashed up Sarah under Del Rio's influence. I'm not about to let a chance to And don't go beating up on him. I was on the Jury panel. I voted for the repealing of his demotion. The Spartan is like you or the-"

"Don't you understand Tom? He and the other three's will never be like the Four's. Ideally we are supposed to be like them! And that's what will never happen. Because we understand a little bit more of life because we weren't conscripted and drafted or enlisted as early as they were. All they've seen is war. Working with them is no problem. They get the job done quickly, efficiently, brutally. If you try to mix the two together? It won't work. They're too much like the two's in that they can't function outside the military. They're not social, I don't see them mixing at all."

"Commander, why all the hostility? They're not from Gamma Company. They're from Beta and are some of the finest soldiers if you chance to look at their records. We can have the others learn from them right?"

She turned away from him surveying the slowly growing shape of the planet and its ships.

"I've met several. I don't believe it matters whether its Alpha or Gamma. And with the exception of one they all experienced and exhibited unnerving psychological and physiological tendencies. I saw one snap in the middle of a battle. Convinced the world was his enemy and in the end he, the Covenant, and half a platoon of Marines were wasted.

Tom, they're walking time-bombs with their augmentations. The chemical mix? It goes bad at some point! The ultimate question is when! They were designed to be expendable as well and that's turned them against us almost! They can't trust the others in a squad, a unit, an entire compliment of Spartans! How can they trust us when they were designed to be cannon fodder and they know so?"

He didn't have an answer. But finally said,

"I understand your reservations Sarah but if I were to transfer some to the Infinity you would work with them like you have with the rest? You would see them as comrades? As Spartans under your wing and you would therefore attempt to get them to fit in with the ship?"

"Whatever you ask Tom." she said before turning away and exiting.

Thomas Lasky sighed and turned away back to the board.

"Roland." he said out loud.

The avatar of a British bomber pilot appeared in a flash of gold again.

"Yes Captain?"

"File a request of transfer for the Spartans aboard the Dauntless."

"Right away Captain. The papers will be in your quarters later."

"How close until we can fire?" he said looking forward to the ships ahead.

"We are in range Captain. The Dauntless has already engaged."

"All right." he took a moment and felt the eyes of all on him.

"Attention all crew, all hands to Battle Stations! Weapons warm up the Main Gun, target the nearest ship, and fire."

\* \* \*

><p><em>Hope you guys enjoyed! <em>

\_Leave a review if you desire! Submissions for characters being taken right now. \_

## 12. Chapter 12

\_Hello! What's up readers? Who's ready for the longest chapter in this book so far? I am! A lot of things are about to go down and I'm excited to see your reactions! Many thanks to my beta readers are in order (see below for names). \_

\_Last Friday I broke 30,000 hits on my story! Many thanks to you for reading this and shaping my writing for good! This story will eclipse the 75k word count when this chapter is done. 86,000 (give or take a few) words in total! Thanks for bringing me this far!\_

\_In the meantime why don't we do a review or two?\_

\*\*\_Wileomogarff:\_\*\*\_I liked bringing Lasky in to the story as well. I hope this chapter is to your liking!\_

\*\*\_Trife:\_\*\*\_Excellent points. I went back to the first chapter and fixed the description of it to clarify a few things. Thank you for catching that. \_

\*\*\_Guest (1): \_\*\*\_You'll have to read to find out that one.

\_

\*\*\_Divine Toaster:\_\*\*\_Thank you for your time in reading this!\_

\_And now it's time for an author's note! Today you will be introduced to Eric and Dean. The replacement names for Will's brothers Tyler and Alex. The other chapters have been edited to correct fallacies (all errors are corrected to my knowledge). \_

\_Without further ado enjoy!\_

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 12<p>

**\*\*Confederacy Staging Base, \*\***

**\*\*Tycoai System: Border of Wild Space**  
><strong>

**\*\*Two hours after purported "leave" of the Allied Species:\*\***

**\*\*12:00 hours local time\*\***

The inky blackness of an asteroid field with rocks the size of small moons was suddenly shattered with a blur of movement and color before giving form and shape to an expensive craft, a Solar Sailor flanked by two fighters. They three craft immediately swerved to the right and down weaving around a large cluster of rocks. They approached the largest one and paused. Suddenly two massive doors slid apart revealing the inside of an asteroid that had been carved out within were rows upon rows of metal struts holding and supporting an entire fleet hidden within the asteroid that presently dormant. Behind them a massive set of blast doors sealed off the asteroids main purpose.

\_But not for long.\_ A figure inside the ship mused.

The three ships proceeded inside slowly and landed on a private deck with a glass wall revealing the nature of this facility. It landed and the droid escorts split off outside. The landing deck descended and a rich and elegantly figure stepped out the weight of his 82 years pressing down upon him. Even so he relaxed an immersed himself in the power that he had always suspected lay hidden away for the few and elect to discover. By focusing on himself he felt the galaxy moving until he stood at its metaphorical center surrounded by the power of the force.

He gave a smile of satisfaction as he felt the weight of his years lift as he became the center of the universe.

He let it slip and made straight for a conference room by turning a corner.

He paused before the door and put a smile on his face. Today was after all a chance for all to revenge themselves on the Allied Species who had left a small planet literally burning in their wake, something the Republic had taken advantage of in full.

Their arrival had been a surprise that all were still reeling about. How after all did a group of slug throwing primitives throw off an entire invasion army? Not to mention he had lost a valuable asset. The Neimoidian Mar Tuuk may have proved incompetent a second time but he was a massive breach in intelligence that had necessitated a series of major changes to protect security.

\_Such things couldn't be revealed to a bunch of primitives after all.\_

He waved his hand and the doors hissed open revealing a conference room wherein sat the Separatist council attended by various Generals,

Captains, and Admirals. Behind all of them in the back paced General Grievous his talon like feet clanking against the metal floor. Behind him in the corner stood his "apprentice" Asajj Ventress watching with cold interest. The meeting it looked like had been started \_without him.\_

"Ahh Count Dooku." his attention and gaze were turned at once to the Neimoidian addressing him.

"We uhh...were not sure if you would arrive here on time. Said Nute Gunray a little nervously as the figure of the Count stepped gracefully through the threshold and into the room.

The Count's deep booming and oily resonant voice carried through out the the room as he put his full displeasure on the cowering figure.

"I am so sorry to have disappointed you. You can be assured you have my full displeasure but I feel that you may regain your standing if you listen to what I am about to say.

He sat up slightly nervous wringing his hands.

He ignored him and the rest of the rabble.

"You may wonder why I have you called you here today. You are all \_very \_aware, I'm sure, that not even two weeks ago and we believed the galaxy uninhabited in general. Now we have been attacked by primitive outsiders who have thrown our plans to secede and exist as a separate entity into chaos. Today I have learned from my master about a way to strike back and regain our position and momentum which we lost in the wake of our defeats in the Tobali system.

The council murmured excitedly at this information.

Dooku let the words sit and stirred the cauldron of the conference room.

"I have called you here for a reason. I have been informed the Allied Species, barbarians they may be, have made orbit around a planet in Wild Space. This planet is covered with ancient and advanced technology. The group known as the Storm has made it a point to set up a base of operations. The Allied Species are there because they are in a race to rescue two different ships that have crashed on the planet. I propose we take them and our technology for ours. My sources tell me that they intend to jump ship as soon as possible and leave this galaxy to attend with their own matters at home.

I propose that this can not be allowed to happen. Many of their important military heads have traveled here to run this Campaign of theirs. I propose a swift and fast strike that decapitates their leadership or throws them into chaos while we strike at the planet, Storm, Republic, and Barbarians alike. If we take the crash sites and hold them for ransom we can send a clear message that we are not done with our efforts in bringing peace to the galaxy. If they wish to fight us they shall be crushed underneath our iron fist."

"My Lord?" asked San Hill, the head of the Intergalactic Banking Clan.

"Yes Chairman?"

"How do you propose we do this? The sheer size of our fleet stored here won't be enough! The vessel that fought our fleet at Rhen Var destroyed almost all of us by catching us off guard. What do you propose we use?"

"As a matter of fact I do." he said a slight smirk touching his mouth.

With a wave of his hand the windows that were darkened all around suddenly had their blast shields raised and the room saw at large the reason this facility was so large. Another wave triggered the lighting of a darkened room and all gasped suddenly save the cyborg general in the back and the Sith Assassin.

They all got to their feet and walked over.

"But my Lord Count, how? We were told it had been destroyed! Crashed on a moon with no hope of retrieval!" said Nute Gunray faintly now turning to survey what lay below.

"Grievous."

"Yes my lord?" asked the cyborg general with another fit of rasping and coughing.

"You are to take control of the ship. Do not fail me again or your punishment will be swift and terrible."

"I understand. The Jedi and all those who ally themselves with them shall be killed most swiftly." he said with sadistic glee.

"I have more important matters to attend to at the moment. I suggest all of you members of the Council return to your specific posts or risk alerting the Republic to our presence."

The group pressed at the window turned and hastily exited as the droid general and the assassin remained.

"I want no survivors rescued if they do not agree to your hostage demands, both of you. If they attempt a rescue kill them and your prisoners until they meet your demands.

"With pleasure my Lord."

"General? I don't want a ship alive and escaping. Leave them dead in space so they are helpless to watch us slaughter them one by one understood? This is to be the day that every man woman and child in the other galaxy learns to fear us from millions of lightyears away. And should you by chance meet any on the ground you are to kill any of these Spartans you meet.

"Do you refer to one of the soldiers that boarded my ship in the Tobali system? Or one of the soldiers that was purported to help lead the defense of our siege on the crash-site?"

"The freaks that engaged me in the old factory?" interrupted Ventress.

"It seems you two are well acquainted. My only orders for you regarding them are this:"

and the words echoed around the room as the mouth twitched and said with with a smile and quite simply in a sinister whisper,

\_"kill them."\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC INFINITY (INF-101)<br>\*\*

\*\*Forerunner Planet "Yukon", Wild Space Regions. \*\*

\*\*7:13:12 Hours, December 9th UNSC Military Time and Calendar\*\*

"Weapons do we have a missile lock?"

"Affirmative."

"Fire Howlers one through Fifty at the nearest crusiers to keep them off us while we descend into atmosphere!" ordered Captain Lasky as the ship moved closer and closer to the surface of Yukon.

"Confirmed fire!" yelled the PWO.

"Sir, Admiral Tchkova for you ASAP!" yelled the Comms officer.

"Put him up!"

The image of a aged native of Reach in a similar command chair flared to life on a monitor above and in front of him.

"Confirmed hits, two kills!"

The Bridge cheered and the two rapidly cooling stars that had been cruisers quickly faded away.

"Captain I don't have much time." said the Admiral. "We have plans for our Frigate Escorts to help cover us when we descend into atmosphere. Seeing as your more fit to the task I want you to deploy your troops and such when we reach the upper fringes of atmosphere. See if your Frigates can provide local fire support for your ground units. We'll cover you with the EMP cannon and MAC Guns."

"Roger Admiral. Thanks for the assistance."

The connection closed.

"Roland, plot me the best route through this maze." he said starring at the dozens of cruisers blocking his way.

"Captain I would advise we hold our course." he said after a moment.

Lasky realizing this implication called out to the Command Deck, "Helm get us to full burn and ram the ship in front if it doesn't move! Shift focus of the shields forwards."



"Aye sir!" Helm called out.

"Roland are teams ready?"

"Yes sir, Spartan Fireteams and Marines fueled up and ready to go. We got every Pelican we can in the hangar bays waiting for your orders.

"Launch our fighters, get them to clear the area." he said looking at a cloud of gnat like drives of Banshees as they stuck close to their Light Cruiser escorts.

"Sir, hold off on that until we knock this cruiser out." said Roland.

He was right. A Battlecruiser had crossed their paths.

"Incoming fire, torpedoes inbound!"

"Brace for impact!" he ordered.

The torpedoes launched from the Battlecruiser hit the ship with enough force to buck the ship slightly.

"Roland report!"

"Damage was minimal sir, shields down four percent but we can ram it without risk."

"Helm you heard Roland, take the \*\*\*\*\* down!"

"Ramming in five!" Helm called out.

"All hands brace for impact!" he called over the ship-wide intercom.

He clenched his teeth as the Infinity bore down on the much smaller Battlecruiser. This time was different from Requiem when they had the speed of slipspace still with them to their advantage.

The Cruiser had inevitably saw its fate and tried to run and flee but it was too late.

With a CLANG! and an alien sounding screech that reverberated around the entire ship the Infinity hit the Battlecruiser head on snapping its shields with a bright pop before having it shoved back as it bowled it over and tore it open in a ball of purple and blue fire that swallowed it in secondary and then tertiary explosions as Oxygen turned the ship into a molten wreck."

"All clear Captain Lasky." Roland informed him. "Shields at 78%"

"All right then launch all fighters and Pelicans! I'm clearing them for ground contact! All Spartan Fireteams are to be deployed in five minutes." He looked over his shoulder at the rows of Spartan Handlers.

"Are we ready?"

"Yes sir Captain!" said the Spartan named Dalton.

The rest gave a nod and saluted staring straight ahead.

"At ease. You all will need to keep a level head today. Understood?"

"Aye aye Captain." they chorused still looking straight ahead.

"Weapons!" he paused and then gave the order that every ship loved. "Fire at will. Clear the airspace of hostiles!"

The ship shuddered as the weapons all over it leaped to life.

He took his seat again buckling himself in side the crash webbing.

The rest of the crew taking care of the ship gave him some time to think. He felt his mind drift to his conversation with Commander Palmer. \_What he would have given to have Blue Team onboard.\_ He sighed and cleared his head of that thought and desire. He had received the report from Lord Hood that he had ordered them to proceed to Installation 03 and investigate something that was currently as of now classified.

What was left of Gamma Company was else where on other assignment, he thought for a moment of his decision to transfer two Spartan III's. That was enough for a Fireteam but he needed the full compliment of Spartans the Infinity could handle. Making a note to transfer another team aboard he kicked himself mentally for wanting Blue Team on his ship again.

His bias towards the Master Chief might-no he was sure-had been created and solidified because as a young cadet attending the Corbulo Military Academy he had met the legend himself when the Covenant ruthlessly attacked the colony and academy with violence. It was only by him that they escaped, and for that he would forever be indebted. There were many others that hadn't deserved to die.

How ironic it was to be serving with the father of one of his squad mates, he had learned from Roland when learning about the Admiral that Tchkova was the father of late daughter Dimah Katerina Tchkova. She had been the first to die when a Corvette had fired on the orbital elevator and destroyed it and killing her because of her impatience to get out. She had fallen to ground from what had been at least five miles in the air.

He winced as he thought about that prospect he would have much rather preferred her death though to the deaths of the others. The faces of Junjie Chen, Walter Vickers, and Chyler Silva filled his head for a second. He had been so hesitant to leave her, Chyler, her broken lips forming his name before she lost consciousness. He knew that what remained of the defense force and recovered and exfiltrated her body out system but he didn't know where anybody else had left to. The military was rather large after all. It didn't matter. He had seen the severity of the wound, nobody survived that without medical attention.

For the moment as he drew himself back to the Spartans he was glad he

had been able to secure the Spartan III's onboard the Dauntless. Contrary to what Sarah believed he fully held that the Spartans were valuable additions and something that all could learn from. Honestly, she needed to stop beating on William. The man had a hard life as it was but Palmer had now planted the question of whether he should transfer more Spartan III's to the Infinity...

"Captain?"

Roland interrupted his thoughts with another flash of orange.

"What Roland?"

"Spartans and Marines ready to go on your orders."

"Give the order to deploy everything as soon as conditions are appropriate."

\* \* \*

><p>Spartan Gabriel Thorne ran through one of the main corridors with almost everyone else that was going groundside. He was late and cursed himself for the thousandth time as he wove out of a massive knot of people and sprinted ahead of all. Too much time at the armory, now he was stuck almost five minutes late.<p>

He ran into one of the larger hangars to see the rest of his Fireteam waving him over. The roar of the bay was unbelievable as the noise and din of a hundred individual aircraft filled it so that the words of his team were swallowed up by the confusion.

Seeing him they all clambered on a Pelican with a squad of Marines.

"Where the \*\*\*\* were you Thorne?" asked Paul DeMarco agitated.

"I got caught behind traffic." he said sheepishly.

"And you \*\*\*\* near missed your flight." said Madsen.

"Oh give it a rest Madsen." said Tedra Grant from behind her teammate.

"You Thorne are one lucky Spartan." said teammate Carlo Hoya clapping him on the back before he gave a laugh which all the Spartans shared. A few more seconds and Palmer would have been making you do who knows what." said Hoya with a fading trace of a smile.

\_"Hey all you Spartans and Marines back there, I need you guys to buckle up. We got clearance for takeoff and I intend to get you all down there as fast as possible to save my butt some trouble." \_Their Pilot said huffily over the intercom.

All of them in the bay quickly took a seat. The Marines with them were being unusually quiet.

\_"Hope you guys are seated 'cause we're blowing this joint!" \_The pilot cackled and Thorne left his stomach behind as the Pelican shot out of the hangar and dove for the surface.

"Here we go Majestic!" DeMarco bellowed as the dropship twisted in a violent spiral."

"Here we go." Thorne echoed in his head as the Pelican soared towards the ground far below him.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC Morning Light: 7:20:04, <strong>December 9th UNSC  
Military Time and Calendar<strong>  
><strong>

\*\*Hangar A-02,\*\*

\*\*Forerunner Planet "Yukon"\*\*

As a group of twenty five men entered the hangar from the upper decks they were treated to a harsh voice yelling out commands.

"Eighth Platoon! Move your butts faster! I wanted you groundside hours ago! Third Platoon had better be here within the minute or they'll be cleaning in the kitchen for a month! Come on Rangers move move move! The 75th Ranger Battalion does not accept slowness!" boomed a woman in full regalia on top of a large crate where her voice actually managed to be heard over the roar of Pelicans leaving and departing.

As another group of men entered the hangar the woman directed her anger at them.

"Why are you not in the Pelicans with Second Platoon!?"

"No excuses Major Crespo!" called out one of the soldiers in the newly arrived group.

"Well you better have one by the time you toddlers make your way from the surface! You're Pelicans are over there. I don't give a \*\*\*\* what your reasons were!"

The group hastily made its way over to the D79 Pelicans pointed out who were being loaded with different armaments and Platoons. When they had all hastily climbed aboard the troop bay and took a seat they all took a moment to relax and enjoy being out of the line of fire.

"You would have thought it was her last moments on Earth!" said Corporal Eric Gunther as he took a seat next to friend and squadmate Tim Brown who cracked a smile. He took a moment and examined his reflection in the mirror. He was 25 years old and sported a soft pair of blue eyes framed by a short cropped mess of brown hair.

From next to him another man chimed in,

"Probably slept in this morning, now she's trying to make up for it with an extreme amount of \*\*\*\*ing." Specialist Rob Kisling.

The other members of the squad laughed at the joke and behind the last man, Sergeant Major Harry Bowman, the Pelican bay sealed up with a hiss.

All conversation stopped as twenty four uniformed men looked over at the men and women in the blood tray of the Pelican.

"All right Leathernecks, listen up!" he said. The Sergeant was a native to Alaska (at least that's what he claimed anyways) and as such he was powerfully built. Muscled, broad, and a toughened face completed the look. He was wielding an MA37 Assault Rifle, the simple and rugged rifle of the Army for over twenty years despite newer models being adopted, and looked to face all of them again his small mustache quivering as he prepared to speak to them.

"We're going to have a countoff. Seems like we were all a little too slow for Miss Erin's liking." he said in his rough and calloused voice.

The troops in the bay groaned.

"Stow it Second Platoon. First squad?"

Nobody spoke.

"I said Giant squad?"

"Oh, sorry Sergeant Major. Sergeant Jackson." a large African man boomed from over the shape of his M392 DMR.

"Meiners." said a much shorter woman with brown, almost black hair wielding an unorthodox weapon of choice, the MA5C.

"Talbot." a twenty year old male spoke up.

"Endesha." said an African woman. Eric recognized her accent though. Was it Mombassan?

"Lutz." a blonde woman spoke up.

"Kolby." said a blonde male wielding a M6J/C Carbine variant of the M6 sidearm line that featured a detachable stock and a brushed nickel finish. The weapon's barrel was only 355mm long but with the select fire built into it, it possessed the power to not only deal death out but deal it efficiently. A massive twin drum magazine was attached to underneath vastly increasing the amount of ammo it could carry.

"Good, you're not missing anybody. Second Squad?"

Again nobody spoke.

"Oh for the love Valkyrie Squad."

"Sorry Sarge!" blurted out Second Squad's leader.

"Just start."

"Jacob Bauer!" the overzealous Corporal yelled out.

"Haverty." said an Canadian Ranger professionally.

"Gunther!" Eric called out.

"Branley reporting!" said a Australian Ranger.

"Hanson here." a young private called out.

"Lee," a woman called out.

"Emerson!" finished a red haired woman.

There was a moment of pause while Sergeant Bowman looked around.

"Good, you all made it as well. Third squad?"

A third silence met their ears.

"For \*\*\*\*\*'s sake!"

The bay erupted with laughter suddenly.

"You know what forget the countoff. Third squad it looks like you and fourth are here. You're off the hook." Bowman said sitting down as the men cheered.

\_"Hey guys, this is your Pilot here. Welcome aboard your bird hocus today, she's pleased to finally see some action. Are you guys done with your \*\*\*\*\* countdown? I'm being asked to move our \*\*\* off the hangar."\_

A loud chorus of yes filled the blood tray.

\_"Figured as much. Looks like its your routine drop today. Drop you off at say 40,000 feet and I can go pick up some armor to deliver to the Marines. Sergeant Major? Do you have any words before my flying makes you eat them?"

><em>

"Well actually I do Mr. Pilot." Bowman said getting to his feet to a loud chorus of laughs. "As Hocus here just said I got a few words for you today about our mission. Our job is simple. We got a Covenant camp set up right in the spot we want to set up camp. Obviously this can't work because the \*\*\*\*\* don't like to share. So what do we do? We get to blow \*\*\*\* up today instead of lounging about doing who knows what."

"Oorah!" the cry came out from twenty four different Rangers.

"\*\*\*\*\* right Rangers. And do you all know why \_we \_and \_not \_the Corps are touching down first?"

"Because Rangers lead the way!" came the voice of every member.

The Pelican underneath them rose and slowly started moving towards the shielded bay doors of the hangar.

"I'm sorry I didn't hear you leathernecks loud enough! Try it again one more time"

"RANGER'S LEAD THE WAY!" Eric bellowed with the rest of the twenty four men clad in jetpacks and armor.

"That's the Spirit you \*\*\*\*\*!"

Loud cheers echoed in response and in spite of himself Eric found himself grinning. He, for whatever reason was dwelling on his encounter with his brother Dean's CO. A gruff Scotsman.

"You know it's a shame the ODS'T's don't know how much fun a Platoon really is!" Eric said to Tim who was sitting across from across him.

"Probably because their heads are stuck in their pods half the time!" he called back.

The rest of the bay exploded into laughter.

Eric from behind the specialized CH252 helmet that was the direct ancestor of the MJOLNIR Air Assault helmet laughed and then frowned for a little bit. He felt a pang of pity for his younger ODS'T sibling. The last time he had seen him was right after he had lost a squad mate. He had been visibly distraught and it had carried over afterwards. He had found that fact out when attempting to videolink with him. One of his squadmates had answered and said he was in the infirmary for reasons he didn't know.

Pulling back to the present he decided instead he would leave another message to be delivered. His helmet had the appropriate software in any event.

He in a second had pulled up a screen where he could see his face reflected. He watched the red light of recording blink on.

"Yo bro. What up?" \_he started speaking.\_ "Haven't seen you fully in a while. Hope you're doing okay. We're about to be set on a combat drop as you can tell." \_He glanced for a second at several of the Rangers punching each others shoulders at some unheard joke.

"I know you would rather be in the middle of the action. You'll find a way to pay the assassin back. In the meantime see if you can work on getting yourself back into your killer ODS'T state kay? I'm sure your pod and the Storm are dying for you to come back. See you soon bro. If Will's haunting you again do me a favor and focus on dropping in again. I'm sure that's what he would prefer you to do. See you in action soon." \_

He closed the recording and clenched his seat handles as the Pelican roared out of the hangar and into the thin air below.

The rest of the Rangers broke out into a cadence to lighten the mood. He joined in to pass the time but he couldn't shake from his mind now from Dean or William. He wasn't willing to dwell on the fact that one was dead and the other was dealing with death. He now found himself paying attention to a new song that was popular back home.

"I got a girl back home you know, in the land of rain-in the land of snow, "\_

Just who did he have? He had his family. They were doing fine, his sister was going on to become a dancer, his other younger brother was working in weapons tech and his parents were happy whole and eager to have been able to speak with him.

He couldn't deny that years and years after Will died that he wasn't affected. He had surprised himself in the process as well. William had been previously looked down upon as the bossy filler person when his parents weren't around for whatever reason. Immediately after he had regretted being the person that had been to him. Now that he was gone he was achingly aware of the person he had been. Sure he had flaws, a little bit of a temper here and there, arguing with others that he believed weren't correct in their viewpoint, but he had been a caretaker that had gotten him out of scrapes...

\_ "Gave me the mud all mixed with the snow! Why girl! Why can't you see my glow! \_

\_ You said I had a shine, like I was something divine! \_

\_ But girl you just had to go and break me! " \_

Some of the Rangers cheered as one launched into a ridiculous impersonation of the singer. Eric stared at the ground.

Just how had he treated him? It was too late to do anything about it now. He was gone, no way to repair what had happened better to move on and try and fix his relationships with others. He sighed and pulled himself back to reality.

William, after all would've approved.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC Dauntless (DBD-312)<strong>

\*\*\*\*Dauntless Hangar 03-01A, 7:18:02 hours  
><strong>\*\*

"We're all set you two! Climb on board!" the Pilot announced turning to Will and Chelsea.

"Excuse us Pilot-" a voice from behind asked.

Will turned as he prepared to step inside the bay and in one of the chairs.

Two Army troopers and a squad were standing unsure of where to go.

"We were assigned gunner duty?" the two in front asked.

\*\*\*\*\* right you were." Said the Army Pilot. "On the guns now. The rest of you are going to get a little crowded in the troop bay."

The group muttered and shouldering their MA37's climbed in squeezing another three people in the bay. Will and Chelsea moved so they took the two seats closest to the pilot.

While the Marines were usually the ones assigned ground ops the Army was being called up to join the action on the ground and serve an offensive role in their role of garrison and defense. They would take the planet and set up base permanently. As the Brass wanted to move things along it was decided that they would put their offensive



tactics and training to the test. Not that the Army would complain, they relished the opportunity to do something a little out of the norm.

"\*\*\*\*! Look at the Infinity!" one of the troopers said.

"What Wallace? Is it with your mother?" asked another man snidely

But Will watched as it slammed into a Battlecruiser and watched with a grim sort of glee as the ship bent and snap spewing purple flame before it exploded in a ball of hot plasma.

"Hoorah! Score one for the Swabbies!" said Wallace.

The others echoed their elation.

"Please tell me you saw that Henry."

"The whole \*\*\*\* thing!" exclaimed a young private eagerly clutching a video recorder on the side of his helmet.

The rest of the squad whooped and hollered as he announced his intention to post it on the ship's blog.

"Hey, anyone else notice the two Spartans?" asked someone else and suddenly everyone's eye was on the two Spartans.

"Yeah stupid. They obviously want to talk to a real man!" said another trooper flexing his bare arm showing an impressive amount of muscle on it directing his gaze at Chelsea.

The squad laughed at the remark and the ridiculous display.

"Jeff you're an idiot!" Henry managed to choke out through laughter.

\_"Idiot." \_agreed Chelsea over a private link.

\_"Do you want me to write him up?" \_asked Sarah from inside Will's helmet over the comlink to Chelsea.

"Nah he's not worth it." Will said with humor in his voice.

"Well what Spartan?" asked Jeff displeased with his lack of response.

"I actually wanted to speak to your CO." said Will with a challenge in his voice and instantly the aura of coldness was shattered.

The other members let out a mixture of OH snaps! and rising oooohhhh's and laughed again.

"Your mom wants to speak to the CO." retaliated Jeff with a glint in his eye.

"I saved your mom's life during the war." Will responded evenly.

The two sides were now fixated on the two as they continued to trade words for five minutes. The Trooper was pretty good, he had let his

arrogance take over though and made the mistake of suddenly declaring "I saved your Mom during the war."

"I bet she thought you were in debt to her somehow." said Will seizing the advantage.

"Why's that?"

"Because you were repaying her for having the son that's saved your skin from being tanned by your CO for your disappointing amount of masculinity."

The Falcon was filled with laughter as Jeff realized what had just been said. He stared dumb faced and finally cracked a smile and joined in the laughter. He was rewarded with pats on the back from his team and Will extended his hand in a handshake.

The Army Trooper took it hesitantly and shook it and apologized.

"Try to impress her some other way in the future trooper.

Jeff paled suddenly as he realized that he had essentially been hitting on a female Spartan. Chelsea suddenly took up the act and leaned forward tilting her head looking him up and down and suddenly pulled away with mock disgust. Will joined in laughing this time as Jeff made the smart move of sitting back as far as possible.

"Better luck next time soldier." Chelsea said with a glint of humor.

"You know it figures I would hit on a girl who could kick the crap out of me." he said dismissively. "Still.." he flashed a smile at her.

"Whatever solider." Chelsea said ignoring him.

After a few chuckles Henry broke the silence.

"You know Spartans? If you're ever looking for a break from all the Spartan things you do we have a firing range competition every month. I'd be willing to wager you'd easily beat us.

"-or poker night!" interjected Wallace.

"Sorry, I don't gamble and a shooting competition would be too mean for you."

A collective groan was let out by the army troopers.

"Dang it, why do you guys have to be killjoys?"

"It's in our nature." Will grunted. "We're human as well you know. We do have some grasp of social interaction contrary to popular belief. Tell you what, you save our skins somehow or become Spartans and I'll have that competition with you."

They muttered their ascent and started a conversation of which he had no interest in instead sitting while the Infinity descended through the layers of clouds. A subtle shift in gravity told him they were

descending now. A flight of Sabres flew past engaging a Seraph that exploded into flames as its drive detonated. Behind them a Marathon class cruiser had moved into orbit and was releasing a large group of Pelicans.

They cheered accordingly as they flew by and wagged their wings.

"Hey, Pilot!" yelled one of the occupants of the Falcon.

"What?"

"How long we gunna be stuck here on this crate?"

"As long as we're still in space moron." he quipped back.

The Falcon erupted with laughter as the Pilot shamed the speaker.

\_"Moron." \_Agreed Will.

He was treated to Chelsea laughing over the comms at that statement.

A Poseidon class Light Carrier zoomed over their heads in a different direction flanked by two Strident class heavy Frigates and a Vindication class Light Battleship as they descended into atmosphere. All of which were preparing to engage what might be below. They were still in air too thin to support the rotors of the Falcon and with the payload of Spartans and Warthog it was carrying Will was glad they weren't falling to the Earth.

Will noticed all around them now Pelicans were being loaded up with supplies and a mixture of the Marine and Army compliments. There were a few Albatrosses that were readying for departure with supplies and troops that was momentarily shadowed by the enormous hulk of a Vulture Heavy Gunship as it was moved via crane to another spot where it was being loaded up with ordinance, a quintet of Hornet's were getting set to go, and some Falcons to his right were being loaded up with Army squads and the hangar was reaching its previous noise levels as some of the Pelicans were preparing to leave with ground compliments of Marines. From way to his left a column of Scorpion tanks and Warthogs were being attached to the back of any vehicle that could carry it.

A fully decked out combat Pelican roared out of the hangar and disappeared from sight with a roar and likewise a second and a third did after a moment. Suddenly from above them Will heard the engine hiss to life and the rotors start moving slowly.

"Hey we're moving Samuel. Better get your butt strapped in on that gunner's chair." said Henry as the extended platforms on the side retracted leaving the Falcon sitting on two very narrow skids. The man named Samuel quickly took a sit and strapped himself in pulling the gun turret down and towards him.

Will mused for a second on the very fact they were in a Falcon, an older yet reliable and staple of the Army Air Force that could easily transport a Marine squad and provide fire support for troops below.

While they weren't against using Pelican's, the Army preferred more of an 'all-in-one' package, even if it was a little bit older. Will wasn't complaining, he had seen them in action against ground troops and the valuable addition even one made to a firefight.

"Hang on to your helmet's people. Better pressurize them too! Tower has just given us permission to take off!" \_The pilot said cockily as the rotors spun up even faster until the crane released it and it was flying under its own power.

He laughed as the rotors were spun up to take off speed adding to the cacophany.

"And we're off people! Woohoo!" \_he finished with an elated yell as the Falcon began to inch forward.

He had gained enough thrust to move the heavily laden Falcon out of the bay when suddenly he jammed on the thrusters and it sped out of the hangar and into high atmosphere above.

Will clutched the restraints of his chair as he tipped backwards slightly and to the right and the Falcon shot out into the cold air leaving his MJOLNIR suit to adjust it automatically. He looked around the edge to see the Dauntless break through a wall of clouds

"All right Spartans listen up. You're going to need to prep for your HALO jump. We'll descend to 35,000 feet and you can make do your thing then! Give me the word when you're ready and I'll release your 'Hog okay?"  
><em>

"Roger that Pilot."

"How high are we?" \_asked Henry over his helmet comm as the air was too thin to breathe by its self.

"We are currently at 50,000 feet descending 2200 feet a minute. Without your pressure suits your lungs would be filled with fluid slowly at this height" \_Sarah chimed to the slightly panicky soldier.

"I think I'm going to be sick!" \_he cried suddenly going white behind the helmet.

"Don't do it or you'll drown yourself." \_said the Pilot mercilessly.

Two minutes passed and suddenly the clouds they were over broke and they got an unprecedented view into the valley. Below them a long stretch of mountains stretched out north and south with chains branching off east and west. The slopes met below and turned into coniferous forests which ran along in great rivers of dark green. Those gave way to plains that continued meeting glaciers and more mountain all along the way.

A glittering river ran its way farther ahead of them snaking its way from a large mountain through forests and carving a canyon before emptying out eventually into a large and glittering sea.

"No wonder they're calling it Yukon." \_Will said to himself.

A few more minutes passed where they took into the scenery and Will noticed on his HUD they were nearing 35,000 feet.

On cue the Pilot's voice crackled in his ear.

\_"You two all set?"\_

\_"We're good." \_said Will. The two made their way on to the skids and readied the parachutes on their back.

\_"Releasing the 'Hog now!" \_the Pilot said as a metallic clunk was heard. Will saw below the vehicle drop suddenly behind them its parachute waiting for them to deploy it.

\_"It was nice flying with you Pilot."\_

\_"Good luck to you two. Falcon Victor Three Echo out."\_

\_"We'll be looking to save your skins Spartans!" \_said Jeff.

\_"Not very likely!"\_ Will yelled as he moved past the men in the middle of the Falcon and stood on the skid, gave a salute, and then jumped backwards off the Falcon with Chelsea following him a second after. He felt the wind tug at him as he came out of his backflip dive off the Falcon and felt the air flow around him. Here he was in his main element.

He hadn't selected the Air Assault variant of his MJOLNIR helmet right out of graduation for nothing. He pulled up a surface grid of live images being transmitted from UNSC ships as he reached the tumbling form of the Warthog. He watched his altitude quickly unwind to 15,000 at which point was able to get a hold on it. With Chelsea following close behind they both grabbed it and fell with it for a second. He scanned the live imagery with the corner of his eye.

\_"Good, we're moving to a good drop site."\_

They both clutched it and kept it from tumbling elsewhere. Will moved over his hands gripping the vehicle for balance. He motioned for Chelsea to let go when he untied the parachute. Said parachute needed him only to pull a string and it would fly free in three seconds. He took a hold of it and readied himself to push off as the altitude was winding to 9,500. He was using the map to guide it to an elevated spot where they would be able to start easily.

"Releasing it in three!" he called out. Holding a fist he held up three fingers and quickly put them down. Chelsea pushed off as the last finger went down and Will pushed off pulling it as he did so. He was rewarded with the parachute unfurling with a gust of sound and material and instantly the Warthog disappeared high above them.

He quickly reached behind and pulled his own cord and the Parachute quickly unveiled with a loud \_THWUMP! \_He looked up to see Chelsea a hundred feet above him. They were descending to what looked like a ford in the river with a large forest on one side and a prairie on the other.

He angled himself now facing upright towards the crest of a hill. The

minutes fell and Sarah pointed out various aesthetic features of the planet until she interrupted their descent by saying,

\_"Spartans. You'll be interested to know that now we're on the ground so to speak I've been able to interface with the planet and whatever Forerunner Tech is in this area. This planet has been designated as simply Cryptum. I have no information relevant to it at the moment. I've located a sort of terminal of sorts hidden away from here in the forest. There's a "road" that leads to it.\_\_"\_

A chill ran up his spine at the name of the planet.

\_"Sounds like a delightful place." \_said Chelsea.

"If this place is a literal crypt what do you think is here?" he asked.

\_"Don't get your hopes up. We're looking for distress signals okay? For all we know they're all dead." \_she said darkly.

Will saw the ground approaching rather fast and touched the ground his feet running up the side of the hill until he got his parachute under control. Seconds later Chelsea touched down 400 yards from him and a minute later the Warthog landing wheels down.

"Come on. Let's get these folded up and out of here." Will said.

The next few minutes were spent getting the silk rolled up and reset. They put the three packs in the storage unit of the Warthog.

"I'm driving then I guess." Will said as Chelsea climbed on the back of the LRV and warmed up the barrels of the M41 Vulcan turret.

He climbed in and started it up with a growl.

"Okay Sarah, where to?" he said shifting it into drive.

\_"Around the base of the hill you landed on you need to circle until you find the river. There's a path for you already cleared.\_\_"\_

—

"Convenient." he replied throwing it in motion. He charged down the hill circling it until he saw the ford. There marked on both sides were little blue posts that reminded him of a Sangheili Honor Guard's staff, only these were much taller and with red lights at the top.

He steered the hog between the two and charged up the bank of a river moving northwest into a forest where a rocky cliff face was steadily becoming a mountain. He eased it slower as the road narrowed. They continued this way until a nav marker showed up on his HUD.

\_"There you'll find the terminal. It appears to be like an information center. It's likely we might encounter hostiles.\_\_"\_

"Thank you Sarah. Let us know if you pick up the signals."

He left her to continue searching for the elusive signals and any other places .

As he drove the Warthog he thought of what an enemy would most likely do. The trees while thick had their leaves and branches high off the ground leaving the forest floor littered with needles and branches from trees and an enemy hiding behind it exposed. It was dark and the headlights from the hog illuminated the trees for a good distance. There was little change of a Jackal perching up in the tree. The needles were too thin at the lower levels to provide accurate cover for a sniper and up higher they would have a mess of foliage to shoot through.

Even still he kept a wary eye for enemies as the Warthog turned North up a hill and suddenly stopped in front of a large structure that appeared as they crested the hill. A metal ramp illuminated with blue light running all the way up into a door that set it farther back inside a large rocky hill.

"This it Sarah?"

"Correct. Inside you should be able to plug me into it."

He braked in front of it and turned the 'Hog off.

He disembarked from it carefully and stepped down careful not to make much noise. Chelsea followed behind holding a Battle Rifle in her hands ready to take action.

Will motioned for her to move forward up to the door. He grabbed the FS2000 that was hanging across his back by use of the magnetic strips (the other one as slung around his other shoulder.)

He watched their rear and moved up behind her. The thermals showed nothing but he was still wary. This forest wasn't too inviting at all he decided.

Chelsea cautiously went up to the door and traded the Battle Rifle for an M90 Shotgun. Slowly she went up to it until its motion sensors sensed her and slid open with a hiss.

\_Move up. \_He blinked his signal lights.

She hesitated and did so while he walked closely behind and scanning their exit. Something wasn't right, and his skin was on edge.

It was then he saw on his motion trackers a blip.

He froze and ordered her to stop by winking a red light.

She stopped as well and they were motionless. Nothing could be heard, an eerie silence was all that was heard, except for the occasional gust of wind which set his teeth on edge.

"Move up quickly." he ordered.

The two of them moved down the hallway faster but silently as they could. Their footfalls even seemed muffled.

At last after a short while in the tunnel they came up a ramp to a single dais that looked over a large pit. He decided very quickly that he didn't want to go down into the pit. A single holographic

panel stood in the middle.

"Insert me there." said Sarah marking it on his HUD.

He did so and Sarah's avatar appeared.

"What is this place?"

"Hold on. I'm working on it." she glowed brighter for a second as she worked to process the information being shown her. She was moving through it as fast as she allowed. After a moment longer she stopped turning back to them as she did so a large holograph of the planet appeared in the empty space of the chasm.

"Now?" asked Will somewhat nervously.

"Well I have good news and bad news."

"Good news first."

"This place seems to be a You are here sign as well as a library of the planet. I've found the location of the distress beacons here." she pointed and a the holograph lit up.

"So why are you pointing to a mountain. Are they underneath?" he asked as a mountain range nearby lit up in red.

"That's where the bad news comes in."

"So they're underneath the giant mountain." said Will.

"I didn't bring my shovel." said Chelsea.

"That's not it." said Sarah. "There's a lot of reference to nets when I look at it.

Will's uneasiness grew.

"Nets? For what capturing?"

"Actually yes. I've taken the liberty of disabling the system that does it but the primary purpose of the planet seems to be the prevention of vessels from leaving this planet and locking them inside ice."

"Why, how?"

"It would appear this planet was to be used to capture any vessels with Flood contamination and prevent them from leaving by locking them inside a mountain and dispatching teams to eliminate the threat."

Will's heart dropped.

"Is there any sign of infestation? Scans? Readings?"

"No. I can detect no Flood Bio-Mass or DNA on the planet as of large."

"Wait, you said something about teams?" asked Chelsea.



And then suddenly Will's motion tracker showed that an eerie red blip. Then two, four, eight.

"Eyes up Castle 4!" said Will retrieving the data chip.

Something was moving down the hall. Methodically, mechanically.

He looked down the sight still seeing nothing on thermal.

"Eyes open." he said moving cautiously towards the dot.

\_"Castle, I believe there is a-"

"Not now Sarah!" hissed Will. He moved swiftly down the corridor. And still seeing nothing waited to see a blur of movement.

There was something definitely ahead.

Looking up he scanned the ceiling and saw nothing. That was before he heard something crash on the ground.

He instinctively fired a single bullet. He watched it hit something and the huge form of something shimmered. It was camouflaged and done so better than any Elite he had ever seen but the brief look at what he saw was disturbing. 12 foot high, insect like almost and wielding a massive blade like appendage on its left arm.

"Contacts!" he yelled out as it suddenly deactivated its camo and with an astonishing burst of speed charged him while he had flicked the full-auto fire on spraying lead. It ran towards him teleporting in a zigzag fashion and suddenly smashed into him with what he saw was a blade. He gave a grunt as he was knocked off his feet and it bore towards him raising the blade over. It was an insect like machine with an armored carapace behind its head and and was still very humanoid at the same time with human like feet

This was only reinforced as a mask covering its face split apart to reveal a crimson red skull. All over its body from its feet to the back of the carapace were thin blood red lines running up to meet it. The face mask retracted and Crimson lines of light marked where the skull was. Other than that a large red net like fan of light extended behind it.

He was pinned down so and he couldn't get a clear shot so he kicked as hard as he could upwards. The presence of shields was made manifest but it did the job breaking him from its hold on him and shot it far enough away that the report of Chelsea's M90 made short work. He watched in vague fascination as the thing seized up and let out an unearthly scream that had human undertones but sounded more machine than anything else and began "dissolving" in a bright red flash. Two things dropped as it finally disappeared.

He seized air into his lungs and stood up making sure he was in okay shape before yanking himself to his feet.

"What the \*\*\*\* was that?" asked Chelsea taking point.

\_"Intel reports that is a Promethean Knight."\_

"What?" said Will trying to calm his pace. "Weren't those only on Requiem?"

\_"It would appear not. This Knight is different than the rest previously encountered. I'm accessing the Planet's database right now."\_

"Not now Commander more of them!" Chelsea yelled rolling out of the way of a large cannon that shot globular balls of light.

He recovered his weapon and fired in precise bursts catching them in the head or chest before switching to a single shot that destroyed three.

One of them gave a howl and leaned forward. Suddenly a smaller Promethean, Sarah identified it as a Watcher, with two "rotor" wings took to the air and immediately put a instantaneous hardline shield in front of the closest one who was a second away from its death.

"Frag out!" Will yelled before tossing the armed grenade.

The Watcher seemed to give him a look of contempt before a tail of light shot out from underneath it and spinning it around tossed it back at him.

"What the \*\*\*\*!" exclaimed Chelsea as she kicked the grenade off the deck before it exploded.

Will thinking of an idea threw another one. It caught it without fail and he fired a two second burst catching it and turning it into shredded pile of metal before it promptly dissolved.

In the end the lack of the Watcher proved the downfall of the Knights. They were too big too hide effectively behind cover and in the end the last one was taken down by a shell to the face with the M90.

Will motioned Chelsea down the hallway with her M90 trained forward and scanning the narrow corridor as he picked up the FS2000 laying on the ground and another angular rifle looking weapon the last Knight had left where it had disappeared.

\_"It looks like these are designated as Guardian Knights. They have the ability to cloak perfectly and they're used in guarding the most important sites."

><em>Sarah informed them.

"I take it they're rare?" asked Will examining the weapon. It was shorter than a Carbine yet larger than a DMR. It had a scope that floated above it and it cast red shadows on the ground.

\_"Extremely. I've been able to pinpoint where we'll get access to where they're locked up. The planet has apparently a lockdown procedure and defenses to prevent entry have been set up.\_

"Can you disable them?" asked Chelsea still scanning for more Knights.

\_"Yes." \_she said after a moment. "\_There's a defense manifest it

looks like it might have the controls to open up the crypt about two kilometers from here." \_A marker appeared on their HUD's.

"Let's move." said Will. He decided to grab the weapon.

He almost dropped it in surprise when it disassembled itself and then reassembled it around his hand. An ammo counter appeared on his HUD registering the 'Lightrifle' as Sarah pointed out to him with 36 shots in it.

"Nice party trick." said Chelsea moving forward picking up glancing back momentarily.

He said nothing but it was hard to ignore the fact that it now seemed made for just the Spartan alone.

The Warthog was still parked outside and Will in haste eagerly boarded it putting the Lightrifle next to him in the passenger seat and starting it.

Chelsea hopped on the back again and Will gunned it forward. He applied the E brake getting it to make a 180 without effort and gunned it back where they had started. Outside clouds had begun to gather and a light drizzle had started.

"Probably should let the Admiral know what the heck is going on." Chelsea said as they drove.

He winked a green light and tuned his comms to reach the Dauntless.

"Sierra 317 to UNSC Dauntless over?"

\_"Roger Sierra 317. This is Admiral Tchkova, we read you loud and clear. What's your status? Found anything?"\_

"Sir, we identified a located a terminal that's identified where the distress signals are coming from."

\_"Music to my ears Spartan." \_said the Admiral.\_"Find out anything else?"\_

"Sir, we confirmed there are Prometheans on Cryptum."

\_"Cryptum? Is that the name of the planet?" \_

"That is correct Admiral. We encountered a new variety of Knight that attempted to attack us when we accessed the data. I'm having Sarah send you the location of the distress signals now. According to her there are a series of defense systems and shields preventing us from entry. We're en route to disable them now. We may be able to open up the crypt as well. If so I would advise making a push to secure the location."

\_"Good, then we can attack when you are ready. It looks like the Storm are holed up on the opposite side of the coordinates you're transmitting. We can't attack from the air with our ships because of numerous anti-air emplacements. We can't risk orbital bombardment because they're near enough we can't attack. It's too close. A shot gone awry could have disastrous consequences if they are buried

underneath that mountain like these coordinates say. You may have disabled what pulls the ships in but you have given the Storm the same advantage. Have Sarah send me the location and I'll send someone to pick you up when you're ready. I'm going to make a push for the other side. If you do take it down then it will be a race to see who gets what first."

><em>

"Roger that Admiral. We'll get it done."

\_"Do so. Tchkova out."\_ he said closing the connection.

They were still a few miles from their destination. They were moving into more rocky and rough terrain with a large pinnacle structure on top of a hill which they were beginning to call.

\_"There Spartans." \_Sarah said flashing the structure yellow in their HUD's.

"Storm forces coming in 12 o'clock high!" yelled Chelsea from the back of the gun turret.

Will looked up preparing to serve but there was no need, they were landing troops at the structure with two Phantoms rapidly, not caring for the single Warthog that they past.

"Well this complicates things." said Will.

"Get me up close and keep it moving!"

"Got it! Go loud number four!" he yelled as they approached the last 1000 meters. He saw the outline of an Elite moving to see what the noise was. He was startled when the Vulcan on the back of the Warthog opened up spewing lead towards it. The shields flickered and the Elite was splattered by the Warthog as it moved to get out of the way.

Just for fun he blared the horn which prompted a trio of grunts to move towards the sound where they were promptly run over as well.

The roar and concussive force of the Vulcan punctuated the air with sharp \_CRACKS! \_that sent another two Elites sprawling on the ground as they crested the hill at full speed and pulled a 180 degree turn throwing a Kig-Yar against the metal wall of the pinnacle structure where it gave a squawk before its spine snapped. A large metal pad was full of two dozen enemies that were trying to recover from the surprise of a very large lead spewing vehicle appearing in their midst.

The majority of the combatants that were Ungoy who promptly fled backpedaling firing their plasma pistols at the Warthog. There were six or so jackals left and a quartet of Elites taking cover behind some deployable energy shields. He jammed on the accelerator and drove back the same direction they had come from where he ran over a grunt that had poked his head for too long.

One of the Grunts did the smartest thing that they could've done in this situation. Will watched as a green sphere of plasma hit the Warthog and it fizzled.

He jumped out of it unslinging the Lightrifle and fired it at the offending Unngoy. An orange short beam of light erupted out of the weapon which Will noted with mild interest had lost its crimson color for its current color.

A neat hole was mid in the middle of its head and it died instantly. He swung around firing another shot at a Jackal that had shot a series of needles that had bounced off his shields. Another shot and he saw that it operated much like a Battle Rifle in burst fire mode.

Chelsea had meanwhile spun the Vulcan and within another two seconds turned the closest Elites to bloody pulps.

"Number Four fire left! Suicide grunt!" Will yelled as he saw it out of the corner of his peripheral vision.

He heard the roar of fire shift a little bit and then a second later two blasts of plasma. He ducked underneath a blow from a Storm rifle aimed by a particularly adventurous Sangheili.

He retaliated by knocking the weapon out of the Elite's hand and it fired thrice before it clutched its chest.

"Will, 9 o' clock!" he heard Chelsea yell.

He shifted his aim zooming on a Jackal that had taken a position high on the side of the structure with the Rifle's sights. He fired and a single concentrated shot hit its shield where it threw it off balance long enough to fire again at the head.

"This gun is amazing!" Will said putting down yet another enemy. He quickly realized the gun was empty of ammo on his HUD and he didn't know how to reload it. The rifle expanded as he fired the last shot breaking apart to where a single cylindrical cartridge was removed by him. Dropping the weapon he swung the German made M27 that was on his back flicked the safety off and fired painting the ground with another Elite's blood. Another two roars from Chelsea who had ditched the Vulcan for the M90 again.

"Clear!" he called out as the last enemy went down clutching a series of holes in his chest.

"Clear! Contacts neutralized!" Chelsea yelled as she swept the now silent courtyard.

"Affirmative. I got point number Four." he said reloading the M27 and trading it for the Belgian gun in the Warthog.

He put the Lightrifle back promising to look for ammunition later. He swung the 2000 around and proceeded down the hallway quickly being sure not to make too much noise.

\_"A few hundred feet left and there's an elevator." \_Sarah announced.

"Storm?"

\_"Can't tell but it's likely there is more at the

top."\_

"Prometheans? Aren't they working together?" he asked seeing the elevator and sweeping the elevator.

\_"To my knowledge they were all destroyed on Requiem, those loyal to the Didact that is.\_ \_The Storm's Battle-Net is reporting hostile activity from Promethean forces in various locales. Mainly their base in the fork of the twin peaks. It would appear they're actively trying to seek to halt further incursion and act as Security and Quarantine forces.  
><em>

"Are you sure there is no indication of the Flood?"

\_"Records show nothing of the sort. As far as I can tell they've only had one other incident before hand where Security was breached.\_

"And?"

\_"That's it. There's nothing. I'm working on the decryption of it.\_\_"  
\_

Will frowned.

"That's not too encouraging." echoed Chelsea.

Will stopped and satisfied there was nothing after looking through the thermal band of his scope stepped onto the elevator cautiously. He kept his weapon ready but moved forward and tapped the holographic glyph on the elevator. The elevator hummed dipped downwards briefly and started rising upwards.

"How's progress outside?" he asked Sarah.

\_"Battle-Net reports are full of reports of a stalemate attack. Either way when we take down the defenses a lot of things will happen swiftly. And if my analysis is correct we may be able to open the crypt from here but there's no telling what may happen. "\_

The elevator inched its way to the top where it stopped with an noticeable but quiet alien sounding grind. They were now in a rectangular room with a narrow walkway slicing the open room in half. On either side the height they had gained through their elevator climb stood around them. Farther ahead the wall they had faced below turned into a platform connected by a hardlight bridge.

As one the two Spartans moved forward.

\_"Hold up, Zealots up ahead." \_Sarah warned.

The two Spartan III's stiffened.

Will looked through the sight and saw six figures walking towards a pedestal far ahead of them where indeed six Zealots and another Elite not cloaked at all stood with another smaller figure who looked suspiciously like-

"Is that the Republic's scientist?" Chelsea asked.

Will snapped the scope up to zoom in. He took a second to register her features and then almost dropped the weapon in surprise and moving aside tackled Chelsea away from looking out at the group.

He sent a prayer of thanks upwards as Chelsea managed to recover her footing and duck as the Elite holding the alien's neck with one hand turned to look in their direction.

The markings on the armor could only belong to one individual and his blood froze for a moment.

\_"Warning, Hotel Victor Tango Jul 'Mdama confirmed spotted." \_Sarah said to confirm his fears.

"Can we contact anybody?"

\_"You have a secure channel. Ringing up the Admiral."\_ Sarah said.

\_"Admiral Tchkova to Sierra 317 what's the problem?"\_

"Admiral we are transmitting visuals of Jul 'Mdama and the missing Republic scientist. We have him in our sights. Please advise."

A moment passed. Then two.

\_"Confirm you have a shot Castle?"\_

"Confirmed." said Will zooming in on the Elite's head while Chelsea brought out the BR55 on her back.

\_"If you can take the shot and take him down. I want you to secure the scientist as well if you can. I'll be listening."\_

Will confirmed and steadied the gun waiting for him to stay still. He was about to fire when a woman with graying hair stepped out into the line of fire.

He nearly cursed as he almost pulled the trigger and frantically motioned for Chelsea to stop.

"\*\*\*\*." she swore when she saw the woman as well.

"Admiral we have a new problem." Will said tense.

\_"What's the problem?"\_

"We believe Doctor Halsey is in the group we don't have a good shot at Jul."

A loud sigh was heard on the other end.

\_"I know you don't like killing civilians but I think-\_

"Admiral we don't know whether she's cooperating to save her skin or not! For all we know she's just playing along!"

\_"Or she's trying to\_ \_ONI down. Do you think she might think badly of what Palmer was asked to do?"\_

"Admiral hold on let me try something before we kill her Admiral."  
Will said pleading.

Another long second passed by. The group was now nearly to the pedestal and 'Mdama was pressing the scientist forwards. She seemed hesitant but fearful as one of the Elite's shoved a Storm Rifle into her back.

\_"Send me a videolink. I want to see everything that's going on."\_

Will did so and the Admiral appeared with his face screwed up in concentration.

As soon as he gave him a nod Will toggled an ultraviolet light on the side of his helmet used in signalling from far away. This particular intensity was unique to human kind. If he could just get her to look at the panel next to her where it was bouncing off.

"Weapon up, get ready to fire if those goes downhill." Will said to Chelsea.

She did so and waited training her gaze on the group far ahead.

\_Come on! Look to your left! \_Will thought in desperation.

And Will from far off noticed Doctor Halsey who was looking at the panel suddenly give a start though she recovered it.

She risked a glance behind and Will stepped the briefest moment out of cover and flashed the light.

Then he waited every nerve and muscle ready to move if she was to reveal herself. His face beaded with sweat as she looked back at the group of Elite's and moved just enough out of 'Mdama's way to give Will a shot.

Will gave a sigh of relief.

\_"My G\*\* you were right!" \_The Admiral said.

Her attention instantly snapped back as Jul gave a roar and threw the scientist back and took Doctor Halsey forward with considerably less force. She risked another glance and Will saw her give the tiniest of nods and her one remaining arm moved from back to forward.

"Number Four move up! We make for the edge of the pillars over there!" Will said tense gesturing to a distance considerably closer as he saw that everybody was focused on the Doctor at work.

They both took a moment and sprinted as quietly as they could praying the hum of the light bridge would hide their footfalls. Will crossed it and dove behind a tall pillar on the left poking out his head.

"I hope you have much better luck than the other did." growled Jul in Sangheili.

Halsey said nothing and worked at tapping and doing it as slow as



possible.

"Why are you taking so long?!" roared Jul impatiently after three seconds.

Will didn't hear Halsey's reply but decided to inch forward.

"Permission to take the shot?" asked Will with as much cool as he could muster.

\_"Take it."\_

And Will felt his body descending into Spartan time and each second now was taking four.

Halsey seemed to know what was happening because she leaned forward as far as she could and Will keeping the sights level with his head squeezed the trigger holding the rifle as close to him as possible.

He felt the gun begin to kick as the hammer was brought down on the casing which ignited the propellant causing the explosion that carried the bullet out of the gun. He watched as each one of them left the barrel in a soft flash that sent it rifling towards the Sangheili's head.

The first shot hit the side of his head where the shields came alive at once and sparked and Jul in slow motion turned his head towards him eyes widened with a mixture of fear and rage he was raising his own weapon, a Carbine.

The second and third shots smashed and sparked against his neck and the shields flickered more. Time started speeding up again and he watched as the shields failed underneath the sixth and seventh shots before the eighth caught him across the chest. A dull purple blossom was seen as it impacted directly above his left heart. Two more exploded along his leg and arm as Will struggled to keep the sights on the ever faster Elite.

It was then that he was forced into cover as a Zealot moved in front and wielding what looked to be a Plasma Repeater sent an immense barrage of Plasma to him.

"Take him down number Four!" Will called out as Chelsea popped out of her cover firing bursts trying to get a clear shot at the leader now on the floor crawling away.

The Sangheili swarmed in front fighting to secure the safety of their leader. Carbine rounds, plasma, and Needles flew towards them and Will was forced back into cover while his shields were low.

"Three Z's down! Shifting fire!"

William caught the glimpse of a purple object moving rapidly toward him. He had lost sight of Halsey and the Republic scientist who were trying to stay out of the firefight.

"Phantom!"

And the Phantom in a desperate attempt to save their leader hit the giant pane of glass in front of them and shattered it with a mighty crash. Glass pelted him as he moved back into cover and his shields dropped slightly.

"Move up!" he roared as the Zealots all dragged him towards the gravity lift.

He charged forward firing burst after burst at the Sangheili. One went down the two others were dragging Jul and firing Carbines.

He rolled forward underneath a barrage of them and fired the rest of his clip at Jul who was suspended rising upwards. More blood blossomed as he tried to take him down.

"No!" he yelled as the lift sealed shut and the Phantom hastily retreated.

\_"\*\*\*\*it!" \_roared Tchkova.

"Target escaped. Believed to be critically injured. Send evac please we'll activate the facility and recover the personel." Will said.

\_"Affirmative. I'll move to capitalize on any distraction. Tchkova out." \_

"Come on Chelsea. We got others here." Will said as he moved forward reloading his now empty weapon. He sprinted forwards and approached the pedestal to find the two scientists huddled on the other side.

"It's okay. Target's down." Will said rolling a body off the Republic's Scientist.

Will took her hand and raised them to their feet.

He looked over at Doctor Halsey and took her in. She was missing her left arm with only a stump left and she had aged a bit during her captivity. Her hair was a little whiter and she had a little bit of a limp.

They group stood awkwardly for a second.

"I'm Doctor Vindi Yallat." the alien said. "Thank you for rescuing me. I didn't know when I would if at all be rescued. You have my thanks and that of the Republic's."

"And you have mine as well...William. That is your name correct?" Doctor Halsey asked.

He nodded vaguely surprised.

"It's been a long time Will since I've seen you and Castle. Reach never killed you did it."

"I would like to think it didn't." he said.

"Your team was instrumental in leading the Covenant on a wild goose chase which gave me enough time to move to Castle Base where it was

more secure. Chelsea, I would like to think you for personally helping secure Noble Team. It..mean a lot to me."

"You're fine ma'am." Chelsea said quietly.

"But that's not what we need to talk about. I would like to apologize for putting up the impression I've been working with Jul. I need to speak with someone higher up so I can tell them all I learned over my Odyssey with the Storm. Putting up the impression of being a turncoat takes a lot more effort than you realize. I may have helped him but I also hindered him. I fed him false data, sabotaged what I could, and made the attempt to derail him while still appearing loyal. I hope you can forgive me."

"Doctor, you've done me no wrong. I have no qualm with you-" Will said.

"-but the rest of the world may not feel that way." finished Chelsea.

"Yes, I foresaw that much. We have much work to do here. If my hypothesis is correct than this is one of several locations used to open up the crypt. We are currently facing it right now." she said placing her hands on the panel again.

"Is it true that the others will open up?" Chelsea asked as Doctor Halsey tapped and moved icons around.

"That-" she tapped a circular icon. "-remains to be seen."

And from ahead of them Will saw a shadow split the mountain slowly until to his astonishment a massive circle had enveloped the middle of it large enough to drag a ship the size of the Infinity through.

\_"Defense grids are down."\_ reported Sarah materializing on the panel.

The shape of a Pelican came into their vision and after a few seconds materialized with the Warthog from below attached to the rear.

A squad of Marine's stepped out to secure the area."

"Whoa its the Doctor!" one of them said.

"What's she doing-"

"These Spartans are going to accompany me to the Crypt. I'll need to be inside so I can work on determining if we can free the ships or not." Doctor Halsey said straightening up.

"I'll have to clear it with the Admiral." a Sergeant gruffly said not used to being told what to do by a civilian.

"Then do it. We don't have much time." said Doctor Halsey.

She stepped onto the blood tray with the Spartans in tow and soon the bay of the Pelican closed and they were speeding off into the noon day sky.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Alright! How about that for a chapter? The battle for Cryptum (or Yukon) is only beginning and we get to see a little bit of his other brother Eric (formerly Tyler) and a little bit of a different side to Will.<br>\_

\_Please leave a review if you liked it! Who can find the Easter Eggs in this chapter?

><em>

\_Many thanks to **\*\*gwb99\*\***, **\*\*Lord Raz\*\*\*\*er\*\***, and **\*\*ArcCaptainFordo\*\*** for being my diligent beta-readers.\_

\_Until next time!

><em>

**\*\*\_theotherpianist\_\*\***

### 13. Chapter 13

\_Hello! I'm back and ready with a fresh chapter for you, the reader.\_

\_I apologize for being inactive for a while. School started and I had to re-prioritize what came first and sadly writing had to be put to the side. \_

\_So let's move on to reviews shall we? In our last chapter we had people that were able to successfully guess the Easter Eggs. I'll put a list in the bottom.\_

**\*\*SII-117\*\***: I'm glad that got your blood boiling. I loved doing that scene at least. That was a moment of awesomeness.

**\*\*\_Marcus:\_\*\***\_ Uh okay then. \_

**\*\*\_Fives32:\_\*\***\_You made excellent points. I just overlooked that when writing. I will attempt to do that more in the future. Thanks for the critique.\_

**\*\*\_Kaore Ryu:\_\*\***\_Del Rio exists for a reason. I'm sorry to pain you with him. \_

\_\*\*AstridHiccup:\*\* The Malevolence was never given enough justice. Expect more action in the future.\_

\_and finally **\*\*HyruleHistorian: \*\***Thank you. \_

\_And now sit back and enjoy the show.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 13:<p>

**\*\*Lower Levels of Coruscant.\*\***

**\*\*Entertainment District, \*\***

The shadows of the building were blurred slightly as a lone figure disturbed the silence. High above the streets where the lower class prowled around for cheap entertainment and fun. Above and below the cross traffic of airspeeders, buses, taxis, and industrial craft all crisscrossed in swift unmarked lanes. He stopped to take a breath in the shadow of a rooftop. He scanned the area with the scope attached over his eye and watched as far below shady characters of all sorts walked in the streets below. The distant sound of a hundred or more nightclubs was barely audible over the roar of speeders but it distracted him for a second.

Skirmisher Zek Lhar poked his head out and watched. He gave a small smile as he noticed a group of women walk by. Suddenly he cursed and pulled himself into the shadows as a Speeder roared by in its own lane free of anyone else.

He cursed himself as he mentally rebuked himself for being distracted by the female populace below. He had always been a sucker for women of any type. One day after he had gotten nice and wealthy he could start-

"No no no! I got to get out of here before I'm found!" \_he cursed again.

That was all that he needed to do. Unfortunately doing so was easier said than done. He knew he was being tailed by Police Droids over fleeing from the scene of an accident involving two vehicles that happened to be stolen that had wrecked. He had been pinned as a suspect for whatever reason and had been fleeing from top of building to top of building. Fortunately they had only caught a glimpse of himself hooded. A simple theft of some other clothing took care of that. Now was just the matter of trying to escape the planet.

He found himself confronted with no options whenever he dwelt on that topic.

He had no means of transportation. A speeder couldn't be obtained by purchasing because he never had money to begin with, theft was out of the option, he couldn't afford to have more people tailing him. And still after that was the problem of getting off world. That would require a ship of extraordinary cost and once again he ran into the problem of no money. He would either be forced to steal money, or a ship, or both.

But what's not to say you could, with a group, pull it off?

\_Too risky\_

The words flashed through his mind and he cut off a hiss as he felt his body constrict and tighten painful. A mental shout and it relaxed at once.

\_Stupid Forerunner nanites, stupid Sangheili, \_these words started their own echoing chorus as he scanned the ground again. If it hadn't saved him so many other times before he would be dead many times over.

He stopped his scanning when he fixated his eye on what looked to be the perfect place to recruit a crew of fellow pirates. It was a bar built into the side of one of the many massive buildings that

stretched from far below to the top of the world joining many hundreds of other buildings like it.

The street below was still packed. He would have decided to just waltz in. Unfortunately the people were still very leery and angry over the Storm's attack. He would have to approach carefully. Perhaps he would stop in and scope it out. As a former Pirate he knew his way around the ropes. If anybody could be found to help him it would be here.

He attached the Needle Rifle scavenged from a dead Jackal he had found during his run to his back and adjusted the plasma pistol on his side. Throwing his cloak over to conceal both he made his way from the shadow of the rooftops carefully and then with extraordinary agility leaped from the rooftop in a single bound onto a large pole facing him. Sliding down quickly he jumped to a landing facing him, then another, and then finally skidding the final ten feet with his feet and hands and right away blended in with everyone who was too preoccupied to notice him.

Zek started weaving his way through the mixed crowd of aliens. He attempted to flirt with a Twilek who immediately shoved him off. Frowning he placed the hood over his head and he broke through the crowd and entered through the open door of the bar. The music and atmosphere were definitely foreign yet familiar all at the same time.

In one corner there was a dancing group of females. With a single fluid gesture he plucked a credit out of a man's stack without anyone noticing and tossed it towards flashing a toothy smile.

One of the dancers flashed him a smile as she caught it and went right back to dancing. He passed the bar without a second thought. He needed soberness this time around and maybe when this was all over he could get himself ten for all the trouble he'd been through.

A few people eyed him curiously but thought little of him. Zek was watching them as well. Waiting to see if any of them made a move. He scanned their faces. None seemed to be the type he needed.

In all of that he failed to see a large burly man as he walked. The two collided and his vision flashed for a moment. The man tripped with a yell and curse before he crashed to the floor and lay sprawled for a second. A few laughs broke out but the atmosphere suddenly changed in the bar and before Zek was seized by the throat and dragged to the edge of the a table and slammed down against it so that his vision blurred for a second.

"What do you think you're doing \_slime.\_" said the man dangerously. Zek had one hand preventing him from choking him completely.

"What do you think you greasy-" he then cursed in his native tongue which served the purpose of confusing and then aggravating the already angry man.

"\_What\_ did you call me?! he howled squeezing tighter.

"Hey, knock it off Dax." someone called coming over.

With a single blow he rounded on the man and punched him squarely in

the jaw flooring him. The bar suddenly was in a uproar.

Zek squirmed out only to be rounded on.

"What are you doing, trying to run? Do you KNOW who I am?"

"Yes, a fool, idiot, and everything else that even remotely fits that description of your ugly face."

The bar roared with laughter at that comment.

"You show him stranger!" someone at the counter shouted.

"You know what you...you..." he cursed repeatedly becoming redder with each word. "Nobody messes with me, Dax Ordo!"

Zek noticed that his life was in legitimate danger now. His thought of taunting him had only seeked to provoke him, not intimidate him back.

"It's time you learn...your lesson!"

Zek knew what was going to happen and anticipated the move before he could make it.

Dax seized his hand forward in an attempt to take a weapon which he did yanking it out.

His drunken eyes bulged in confusion.

"What the-"

Zek threw both fists forward as let go in confusion as to seeing this type of gun.

Dax was caught by a punch which made him stagger back and then a punch delivered by a jump to the body that knocked him back again. Dax doubled over and clutching someone's drink hurled it at him.

Zek ducked angry now as his cover was being blown every second he was here.

He yanked the gun back onto his self and was knocked back by a chair that had been seized. The chair broke against his armor but didn't affect him. Instead they traded punches.

"You know," Dax said with a bleeding lip and a suddenly much more sober look in his eye to the now silent bar. "For a runty cheap little pirate you sure don't stack up well against the ones I know."

Zek froze. This guy suddenly had crossed the line of pride among of his species. Kig-Yar were never cheap, they were never runty, and pirating was a way of life.

"What did you say?" he asked icily.

"I said-"

Zek lunged forward and bit his shoulder sinking teeth into flesh

toppling the man. The bar erupted into fresh shouts, laughter, and hoots as Zek started pummeling the man as hard as he could. Vision red, with blood he pummeled him with enough force to knock the air out of him leaving him gasping and breathing for air.

A savage kick was suddnely delivered and Zek was thrown backwards into the crowd.

"He's up!" someone yelled and Dax got up and dove on top. Zek was crushed underneath but somehow managed to wriggle free. Launching another series of crippling punches he was again punched by back. Dax in turn hauled himself back and Zek did likewise. They stared at each other a moment and as they stared something changed between the two and they simply stepped forward and shook hands.

The Bar's reaction was mixed with some people howling with laughter, some booing and egging them on, and still others applauding the performance.

Dax looked just as surprised as Zek was as they broke apart and stood awkwardly unsure of what just happened.

"I take it back, you fight well." Dax said breaking the silence and taking a step closer so it was harder for others to hear.

"You pack a punch yourself." said Zek picking up the Plasma Pistol.

"Heh, that was me being drunk, that doesn't count. Thanks for beating the alcohol out of me."

"You're welcome."

The Plasma Pistol was quickly hidden from sight of others with a flourish of the cloak.

Dax laughed. "Of course my fists would hurt though! What Mandalorian wouldn't have a powerful punch?" He looked over to the bartender and tossed a chip. "Sorry about the mess. Next time I'll hold back on the drinks."

Turning to Zek he grimaced and massaged his still bleeding shoulder.

"You my new friend, have a mean bite."

The Skirmisher apologized shortly but the Mandalorian was waving him off.

He motioned Zek forward and the two left the bar with the atmosphere returning to normal.

"So what's your name?" Dax said turning the conversation back to Zek.

"Zek." he replied simply.

"Got a last name?"

"Yeah, it's the name of the clan I was born into, the Lhars. We used



to be Pirates until the noose was tightened around that type of activity."

"Pirate eh? Not bad. I could tell you know your way around. What did you pirate? Spice?

Zek's moment of confusion was not lost on him for the moment.

Dax suddenly frowned.

"Wait a second," he said rounding on him. "Can I see that weapon of yours again?"

Zek hesitantly showed him the weapon. The Plasma Pistol's metallic casing gleamed in the subterranean light. The tips of the Pistol glowed a faint green with energy.

"What kind of weapon is this?"

"Standard weapon of my kind."

"You're one of those Allied Species."

It was not a question or your threat, just a simple observation.

"Not anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"Left, figured it was time to get out of here out of some galaxy that's far away from mine."

"You're AWOL?" Dax burst into laughter attracting a few curious looks from passers-by that were turned away by Zek flashing his teeth.

"Quiet!" Zek hissed. "Look I've gone AWOL all right? I need help getting off this rock and back, got that? One Warrior to another!" he had no idea what made him say this last part.

Dax suddenly became very serious. "Well then, one warrior to another-tell you what Zek. If you are running away I can help, you, luckily enough, met the right man for the job, however you'll need to explain yourself so I can judge whether it's worth my time to try and help. I can still put you into contact with some people if you need to. "

"Where you off to?" asked Zek as Dax handed back the plasma based weapon.

"It's time I introduce you to a few people. With a little luck we should be able to help, that is if you're willing to help me."

"I think that's fair enough." said Zek silently relieved that things were falling into place. They started walking around the corner to a large building that turned out to be a parking deck as evidenced by the dozens of vehicles coming and going.

Dax started walking down the street at a fast clip until they came to

a sleek red speeder that looked much older than the ones right  
.

"They don't make them like this anymore, this baby's a classic. Been with my clan for more than a century now. Still runs beautifully though. They both climbed in and Dax in a moment keyed the engine and the speeder took off towards the upper levels.

Ahead of them far off they saw the illuminated shape of a Venator Class Cruiser fire its thrusters and ascend into the upper atmosphere.

"Bet you're glad you're not with the rest of them aren't you." Dax said with a grin.

"You wouldn't even begin to understand."

"Then start explaining, we got all the time in the galaxy at the moment."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AI Datalog:<strong>

\*\*Error: Location unknown, \*\*

\*\*Time/date error: pos. 12/09/2558 estimated\*\*

Time of inactivity 05:06:03:06:18:33

\_ALERT: Motion sensors detecting contacts\_

\_Query? FLATFOOT\_initiate. . . \_

\_\_Query? BUCHANAN\_initiate. . . \_\_

\_\_\_Query? EAGLE\_EYE\_initiate. . . \_\_\_

\_Reading:\_

\_Biometric scans needed: 0001000101-000101010000-0001000100-1000011

-

\_Error code: 933\_b\_can\_not\_scan\_

\_Interference level  
8.0+\_

\_Terrain\_scan=mountains=01?\_

\_F\_sys\_restore reqd. \_

\_Initiate  
reboot:\_

\_ERROR:(desig.)conscious\_objection\_:(/9)\_

\_Override code:  
DHA-DD9-E44-44b\_5:40A\_

\_code=accept\_01\_

\_Reboot=01-complete.\_

\_whoami\_

\_SNA 1292-4 \_

\_Query\_Status?

><em>

\_Error: sys\_fragment=01\_

\_\_Error: sys\_fragment=01\_\_

\_Error: sys\_fragment=01\_

\_\_Error: sys\_fragment=01\_\_

\_Error: sys\_fragment=01\_

\_Error: Rampancy?\_

\_Query\_evacbeacon?\_

\_Status: ACTIVE\_

\_Status: INACTIVE\_

\_Query\_evacmessage?\_

\_Status: ACTIVE\_TRANSMITTING\_

\_Status: INACTIVE\_NONTRANSMITTING\_

\_Query status\_station\_Cryo-1-200\_

\_Status: ACTIVE\_

\_Input: Emergency\_Wake=Standby=0, 1-200\_

\_\_Input: Emergency\_Wake=Standby=1, 1-200

><em>\_

\_\_Create\_message=01\_\_

\_\_"We've awaited you for a long time. Unseal the hushed caskets. Take us home to the light."\_\_

\_\_Transmit: Host\_AI: subrt. Pickup/89\_\_

\_\_Await further contact. . .

><em>\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC FORWARD OPERATING BASE "LOOKOUT"<strong>

\*\*LANDING PAD 8A-D\*\*

**\*\*8:23:03 Hours December 9th, 2558\*\***

**\*\*Spartan Gabriel Thorne\*\***

"You know how ticked off I am with the Admiral right now?" DeMarco asked as Fireteam Majestic rounded the corner of a hastily constructed sentry tower towards the large makeshift airfield dotted with tents and prefabricated hangars.

"Oh please. You're just upset that we were deployed only to be immediately reassigned to here because our objective was already complete." said Tedra Grant

"Exactly!" Crimson Team wasn't even on the ground stealing our thunder and we have it stolen by somebody else! How the \*\*\*\* are we supposed to be impressing Palmer when we have people stealing our missions.

"Last time I checked all Fireteams were deployed here for the eventual main assault on this side of the tunnel. There's still some time for action." Hoya said pointing a massive arm to the tunnel right behind them.

"You know, it might be a good idea not to talk about the Admiral like that." Tedra pointed out.

"Hey, next time-"

"Guys! Where are we even going?" asked Thorne speaking up trying to ignore the banter.

"We're going to escort a package." grumbled DeMarco.

"A Fireteam for a package?" asked Madsen skeptical. "Didn't we already play that part on Requiem?"

"Like it wasn't enough we were responsible for bringing aboard the object that almost anchored us to a planet diving into a sun." said Hoya dryly.

"Which is exactly why we should be fighting in the field."

The team groaned again.

"What?"

The rest of Majestic laughed as DeMarco turned around with a curious expression and found themselves walking in front of a landing pad awaiting an occupying vehicle.

Above them the twin figures of the UNSC Infinity and Dauntless cast immense shadows on the ground as they hovered overhead to ferry supplies and provide superior air-support. Closer to the ground flights of Longswords made their rounds securing a perimeter.

Overhead a Vulture, ancient though it may have been, roared overhead to a depot next to them.

"Hey, didn't they phase those out?" asked Thorne looking to interrupt DeMarco's tirade.

"What the Vulture?" asked DeMarco turning towards it while it shut down engines and had men swarming it in seconds making it combat ready.

"Who cares? I mean sure it guzzles fuel like crap but I'm all good with a freaking armed to teeth beast that can fly." Madsen quipped.

"Ever see one of those in action?" asked Hoya.

"I've seen some footage from Harvest." Madsen said trying to remember what exactly had happened.

"And?" DeMarco said slightly interested?

"Oh! So there was a Firebase being overrun by Brutes right? Throwing themselves at the base."

"Typical ape logic but yeah." Tedra said

"So a group of three or so arrive with an armored regiment and the first thing that one of those things did was unleash every ounce of missiles and bombs it had.

"How much was that?"

"Well, when the smoke finally cleared there was nothing left of the advance, I mean it was full of craters, no Brutes, Grunts, or anything."

"\*\*\*\*." Hoya chuckled.

"So what, I mean there are orbital MAC strikes that do the same sort of thing." Thorne said.

"The best part was that even after they wiped apes of the field they went on and escorted the Troops back to their main base. So of course the Covenant try to rescue the survivors and take revenge. They get there and by then everybody's left shop right? Wrong. The Vultures were back and there were a dozen more this time."

"Oh \*\*\*\*." DeMarco said.

"Exactly, it was a killing field." Madsen said with a gleam.

"Poor \*\*\*\*\*." Hoya interjected between fits of laughter.

"Nah, that's the Clones that the Republic uses for all its operations." Madsen said.

"That's really messed up when you think about that." DeMarco interjected.

"Cloning entire armies in months?"

"No, well yes. That's messed up as well. No, they're all made of a clone of one guy."

"Must have been a pretty \*\*\*\*\*." Hoya put-in.

"No kidding." Tedra scowled.

"You hear about what's happening on Coruscant?" Paul asked

"What?" the team chorused.

"There's reports of intense rioting going on in small areas. The planet is very polarized about us right now."

"Not that surprising." Thorne responded.

"That's not it though. Rumor is that there are some who think we need to be brought to justice because we were so rude in bringing the Storm to us."

"Well that's hypocritical." Tedra replied incensed. "I mean after all, they're fighting a civil war as well. We didn't ask to have that brought upon us. Seriously? For a Government \_and\_ \_Galaxy that's supposedly so high and mighty they've got as many-if not more problems, than us. I don't know why they would even want us under their control."

"I'd hate to fight that war." Anthony said shaking his head.

"It would be like fighting the Covenant again." Paul mused grimly.

"And we \_all\_ \_know\_ how that turned out." Gabriel finished.

"At least we still have some of the II's and III's." Tedra pointed out.

"Dude, did you see the two III's on Coruscant?" Anthony asked with a degree of awe.

"Those guys are the real \*\*\*\*\*'s, forget the Clone army, right after the II's they're stunning to watch." Fireteam Castle's leader said with a sly smile.

"I swear Crimson is a bunch of III's in disguise though!" Madsen practically shouted.

"Eyes up." Thorne said bringing them back to reality as he noticed a Pelican descending towards him.

"What do you think our package is this time?" Tedra asked.

The Pelican descended towards them reversing its direction and spinning its cargo bay towards them. A miniature dust cloud was spun up as it touched down and depowered its engines.

"Nothing good I bet." Carlo grumbled.

After a moment the door hissed and opened. In front of Gabriel two Spartans that he recognized from Coruscant stepped out and flanked the side of the pads as a team of Marines stepped forward escorting, in the center, and surprisingly not bound, was

"Dr. Halsey." DeMarco said stepping forward instantly wary.

"Spartan. I need to speak with the Admiral at once."

"Hold on a second. How did you-"

"It matters not. I was rescued and have vital information for the UNSC that cannot wait. I need to speak now."

DeMarco was slightly taken aback.

"Uh yes Ma'am." he said and the team spread out to flank her.

"I think this counts as something good." Tedra said over the SquadCom.

"Shut it Grant." DeMarco said sheepishly.

The two Spartans from behind walked forwards with them as well. They led her past the barracks, turned a corner and arrived at a giant building flanked by towers and guards.

The Marines standing guard at the door stepped aside and allowed the group access to the inside, but not without a few curious glances.

The HQ was busy with multiple screens flashing and changing with operators talking to units in the field, ships in orbit, and other parts of the base.

Standing in the middle meeting with several Colonel's from the Marine Corps and Army respectively was Admiral Tchkova.

"Doctor Halsey." he said noticing her and taking several steps toward her.

"Admiral Tchkova."

"Can I assume we are friends and not enemies?" he said cutting straight to the point waving the Colonel's away.

"We are indeed friends. I thank you for having the Spartans rescue instead of kill me. Especially in light of recent knowledge I have about the interior workings of the Storm."

"You have your Spartans to thank for that."

She turned to face the two silent ones flanking her with a slow nod. The two nodded imperceptibly back.

"Those guys still give me the creeps." Madsen whispered to Thorne out of the corner of his mouth and in spite of himself Thorne cracked a small smile.

"Why are we baby-sitting the crazy lady again?" Tedra complained.

"I'm sure they will be thanked later by humanity itself, Admiral. But

we have more pressing matters. We need to move fast to beat the Storm to what this mountain holds inside." she said turning back to face him.

"And what exactly does it hold Doctor?"

In response she dug with her remaining hand around in her lab coat and suddenly retrieved a small object that looked like a mishapen key.

The Admiral frowned and Thorne did a double take. He had seen this object before.

"What is that Doctor?" said the Admiral eying it suspiciously.

All around the eyes of those assembled turned to look at it. She took a step back and held out.

"This is the key to our advancement as a species. Spartan Thorne?"

All eyes turned on him.

"Do you have the other half of the key?"

He stepped forward and cleared his throat.

"Uhh...well you see Doctor, the Infinity has current possession of the other half."

She relaxed slightly but turned to face the Admiral.

"Admiral while on Requiem I was able to commune with the intelligence known as the Librarian and she gave me both halves of what is called the Janus Key."

"So what does it do?" he asked. "It's a key to what?"

"This," she shook it slightly, "gives the real time piece of every Forerunner Artifact in the Galaxy at any time."

Blank shock wiped his face clean for a second before he lit his aged, war hardened look fall upon him and the Spartan sentries stiffened instantly.

Thorne was suddenly in a daze as he realized the magnitude of what had been thrown to him.

"I will need possession of the other half and then a team to escort me so that I may help unlock the secrets inside this mountain."

"I'm sorry, did I hear you right Doctor? Every piece?"

"That is correct Admiral, every piece, installation, planet, structure, weapon, artifact, it's all in here!"

The Admiral swayed for a second and braced himself against the table.

"Good Lord!" he said quietly.



"Which is why Admiral, I need access to what's inside."

He suddenly straightened up.

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that Doctor. I'm going to need you fully debriefed on what this 'key' is and what you know of it. Protocol dictates I need to establish a firm military presence board one of our ships at once. We don't want the Storm to try an act of revenge and silence you."

"Admiral, the installation underneath that mountain, contains something with regard to this key. I need to go down there-"

"There are other science teams that can do work for you. Doctor, please, you will be of more help aboard the Infinity than down here. The Infinity \_does \_hold the other part of this...key."

A moment of silence passed between the two.

"Fine, I want to have full knowledge of progress on the ground, developments, findings-"

"Done." Tchкова interrupted. "We have a Platoon of Ranger's trying to open up the door on the other side. As soon as it opens up we're going to leave to be aboard the Infinity. I need a full debriefing on your adventures with the Storm and that will have to come first."

"\_Good luck trying to get that open with just a Platoon. What are they thinking?"\_ Hoya spoke over an open channel.

"Doctor, it would be best if we were to move to the Infinity."

"Then lead the way Admiral. I trust your judgment is sounder than most individuals in your position." Doctor Halsey finally said after a moment.

"Thank you Doctor." He gestured to some ODST's and they led her out the door to their transport.

He strode over to the table and within moments two figures materialized into holograms.

"Admiral." They both saluted.

"General Greene," he nodded to the older man in Army Dress. "General Warner." he nodded to younger but more grizzled General in Marine Corps attire.

"What can we do for you Admiral?" General Greene asked.

"I'm moving to the Infinity. I'll brief you on why later from a more secure location but I'm recalling you both from the mountain to the FOB. I want you coordinating troops when that mountain does open up. However I think its time we let the Spartan Corps do the heavy lifting for this portion. You will remain on standby until circumstances require it. Understood?"

"Understood Admiral."

"General Greene, have you made contact with the Ranger Platoon?"

"I have not been able to. Their Pelican was shot up by the Storm. They're on their own for the moment but I have full confidence in them. They'll get it done and then we can role right in."

"I hope so. I convened with our Sangheili friends in orbit. The Storm may be in disarray and in full retreat but I don't want the Republic, when they get here, to be getting their hands all over this site. There's too much at stake here if underneath that mountain contains what Intelligence says there is."

"How exactly will you tell them not to touch anything?" Warner asked.

"We can't. Which is why I hope those Ranger's open it up soon. The Republic may have those that have good intentions but frankly they don't understand what they are dealing with. I'll see you back at the FOB soon. Tchkova out."

The connection closed and he turned to the Spartans still standing there.

"As you have just heard the Spartan Corps will get to exercise its muscles. Get down to the tunnel and link up with the rest of the Spartan. We have a limited amount of time. I want as much of whatever is inside controlled. Once the Republic get's here I doubt that the Admirals and science teams will feel good about being denied. Dismissed."

The two Spartan III's were the first to leave with Fireteam Majestic being led seconds later out the door with DeMarco in front.

The air had become colder since they had entered and the sky had clouded over. A light rain was falling that made a rather nice ambient noise to the howling of engines, whir of machinery, and shouts of soldiers.

"What did you make of that?" Thorne asked.

"Nothing good. If the Admiral is that concerned about the Republic once we're inside that mountain we'll need to find whatever that thing that was mentioned is."

"The Absolute Record?" Tedra guessed.

"I think its bad news that the good Doctor had to be here of all places. How did she even get here?" Madsen frowned as they walked towards the general direction of the Motor Pool.

"Jul probably brought her here because he guessed that whatever this record is, is here." Paul answered.

"Dang Thorne, I think you might've saved the galaxy single handedly. If you had dropped or lost that key..." Tedra stopped as they all thought about the implications of that.

"I've had enough of Doctors, keys, crazy alien galaxies, or the Storm for a lifetime." Hoya interjected as they walked through the chain

link gates of the motor pool."

"Yeah, why can't we go back to Rio and do a little community outreach?" Madsen joked.

Paul and Anthony chuckled and fist bumped each other as they walked towards a massive section of Warthogs.

"What do you think guys, go by Hog or Foot?" Tedra asked.

"Hey!"

They turned to see a Trooper walking towards them.

"You guys need two Warthogs correct?"

"In fact we were just debating that." DeMarco said.

"You guys can take the Gauss Hog and the regular Hog on the right over there." He pointed to a large open garage where the two vehicles sat.

"I'm driving." Hoya interjected.

"No I am." DeMarco shot back instantly. Madsen can sit passenger and snipe. You can be on the gun."

"Remember what happened last time?" Carlo asked cocking his head to one side.

"Hey Requiem was bad enough for everybody. Robots that would pop up anywhere, robots that kidnapped crazy scientists, artifacts that teleported you to the middle of no where-"

"We get it." the rest of Majestic chorused.

"Well if you don't mind I think I'll go driving with Thorne." Hoya grinned.

"If you're not going to roll the Hog again." Thorne cheeked back.

"Seriously guys, that was just hitting the wrong pedal. Come on!"

Thorne just shook his head as Hoya clambered on to the LRV while the Rest of Majestic climbed on to the LAAV.

The two vehicles were started up and DeMarco led the way with his vehicle.

They stopped in front of another gate leading to the outside world. It slowly pulled apart and the two Hogs accelerated out.

\_"Hey was it me or were those the same Spartans on Coruscant that we saw?" \_Tedra asked from the Gauss Cannon in the leading Warthog.

\_"I think so." \_Thorne answered back.

\_ "What are their names you think?"  
><em>

\_ "I don't know. Probably too classified for us to know still." \_Hoya pointed out.

\_ "I think Palmer would have kittens if they were assigned to the Infinity." \_ \_  
><em>

\_ "What, to train us?" \_Hoya said slightly hostile.

The group sat uncomfortably with that statement.

\_ "Well, there was Fireteam Castle and all the others on Requiem." \_Thorne broke the silence.

\_ "The idea of mixing the two makes me uneasy. I'd rather we teach them to loosen up a little bit. What do you think Paul?"

><em>

\_ "The tall guy back there, he could use a little bit of that I think." \_

\_ "The one with the dark armor Tedra?" \_

\_ "Yeah." \_

\_ "Wonder what his problem is?" \_Madsen mused.

\_ "Man, Anthony, we all got problems." \_

\_ "Shut up. We're getting near the mountain." \_

\_ "I'm just saying." \_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC Pelican en-route to Ranger Deployment Zone:<strong>

\*\*Storm(?) occupied territory:\*\*

\*\*9:07:09 hours\*\*

The Pelican shook slightly as it rocked in the gale force winds as it maneuvered itself in position over its target skimming over clouds tossing mist and ice in its wake as its pushed its way through turbulence and dense air banks thrown up by the mountains.

Eric was nervous. He wasn't nervous about the drop, the abysmal and foggy weather conditions, the thoughts flashing through his head with every scenario possible for this mission;

Actually, he didn't know what it was.

Three minutes ago the Platoon had received orders from Admiral Tchkova and then Major Crespo who was still talking to the Sergeant Major about their orders. They had been extremely cryptic as far as

he could tell but he still had enough sense to know that they were being diverted to some other location. They didn't have all the time in the world and they kept tempting fate more and more with every second here.

He was watching Sergeant Bowman intently. He seemed to be just as confused as everyone else and made that abundantly clear.

He finished with a displeased "Roger that Major. We'll get it done."

Eric beat everyone else to the question.

"Sarge, what the heck just happened?"

He looked at him for a moment before gruffly answering "Orders got changed. The rest of the Ranger's are taking care of the Storm."

"So where are we going sir?" asked Branley from his corner.

"Our objective-" he said raising his voice to address everyone, "-has been changed."

"To what Sergeant Major?" asked Emerson.

"We've all heard how the Storm have set up camp on the other side of this mountain." he said pointing to the mountain they were circling right now on a holographic projector that sprang to life. "However we've been pulled off that mission for another harder task."

The map changed location and zoomed into opposite of where the UNSC was currently deployed.

The bay sat still with all eyes on him. Bowman, had a flicker of question and doubt in his eye which he snuffed out as all sat listening to him.

"The Admiral has reported to me that a Spartan Team has managed to pinpoint the location of the distress signals which are underneath this mountain. They deactivated the local defense grid and we're able to make a hole in the side of the mountain. However Rangers, to get in you need to access it from the other side and the Storm have pulled off their engagement with us for the time being because the Spartans almost managed to kill the alien son-of-a-gun Jul. His forces are in chaos right now which gives us our perfect opportunity now to slip in and activate the door and allow the Marines on the other side the ability to slip in and secure whatever may be inside."

"Score for one for the freaks." someone muttered.

"Better them than Jul. But of a relief that something's thrown them into confusion."

"Sir? Can't we pick up the distress signals if one of the doors is open?" someone asked directing conversation back to their mission.

"No." Bowman answered simply. "When the defense grid was deactivated the signals for reasons beyond any of your pay-grade, stopped. We

unfortunately have to trust that whoever is there is alive and that maybe they saw that we deactivated one of the doors. Major Crespo is having the Infinity supply us ordinance when we secure the place. A platoon of ODS'T's were due to help us from an orbital drop but they've been siphoned off to help with the main assault on the first door. The Brass want as many of their troops as possible in the passage as soon as we open it up."

The Rangers all began to mutter dissent among themselves.

"Rangers! I don't want any more bellyaching understand? You've all so far had a great many people help you come this far. The Spartans did the hardest part and almost managed to kill the Hinge-Head himself. Just what are we going to do now to repay them and the Storm now that we have the opportunity to secure the men and women inside?"

"LEAD THE WAY!" the cry echoed throughout the Pelican.

They all heard the Pelican's loudspeaker crackle and stopped their sudden cheering.

\_"Sorry to interrupt. The loadmaster should be heading back now. We were conferring about the best place to drop you guys off. We'll be dropping in thirty seconds. Your target is a small hill right above the tunnel access control station. Thanks for flying today. I'll deploy what ordinance I have on board once you guys are on the ground."\_

The door opened to the cockpit and the loadmaster stepped out.

"All right Ranger's we're over the drop site. Winds are from the south at 8 knots and you should enjoy your flight.

The normal ambient red light was replaced by green and the Rangers as one stood up.

"Check your front!" the Sergeant Major bellowed from the back of the Pelican.

Eric stood up and readied his weapon and stood with arms straight down in front of the person to his left who was now behind him.

As one the Ranger's checked the Jetpacks ahead of each other. They were lined up two by two with the Sergeant Major at the back and as one the ranks called forward that they were checked and ready to go.

"Checked!" the first row called.

"Checked!" second row called out.

"Checked!"

And on they continued until finally. Sergeant Bowman ended with an almighty "Clear!"

A single note chimed throughout the bay and the loadmaster announced he was lowering the door.

As he did so the wind ripped at them as they held on to the

restraints and waited for the Pelican to depressurize. They were in the middle of a dark cloud bank and nobody could tell the ground from the sky.

"Right Rangers! Lead the way!" Bowman shouted and they all moved forward by two alternating which line jumped out their figures quickly becoming mired in the cloud layers. Eric moved forward and polarized the helmet. He took a few steps and then took a running dive out. He gave an idiotic sort of yell as he did so but it felt good as he plunged downwards into the clouds below to the ground which was fast approaching.

His HUD marked the locations of all the Platoon members via IFF and he made sure to give himself enough of a bubble so that he wouldn't run into anybody. Bodies that hit from extremely high up were very messy to clean up.

"I see the ground Sarge. Area is lightly sprinkled with contacts." \_one of third Platoon's men spoke up.

"Feel free to engage." \_he said with a gruff smile.

From below Eric saw the flash of a rifle and then heard the crack of the weapon. The shot must have hit something because the comms came alive with whoops and cheers.

Below he saw the Ranger's activate their jetpacks and begin the easy and brutal work of taking down what resistance there was.

Eric saw an Elite below and triggered the jetpack to slow him down. The MA37 in his hands clutched as tightly as they could.

"Second squad down the hill! When you touch down!" \_Corporal Bauer called out as Eric saw him touch down, the other members in the squad about a hundred feet of the ground firing as they descended.

"Giant squad keep your head down, watch the Shades on the butt!" \_Branley called out as the tell-tale bolts flew through the air at random.

"It's butte you moron!" \_

Eric laughed as Sadie Endesha, from Giant Squad corrected him as she dropped past Eric, igniting her Jetpack, and taking aim at a group of grunts on the ground.

The ground rose up and met his feet with a burst of snow. Eric ducked as plasma rained over him. Someone else silenced the offender with a well placed shot from a DMR.

"Come on move it!" called out Bowman as he landed with a thump on the ground. He raised his weapon and demonstrated how to do so charging down the hill. Two Jackals fell in quick succession.

The Ranger's that had cleared off the top of the hill from where they had all landed charged over the top and down the mountain side.

Eric ignited a jetpack again and the face of a small Covenant "fort" greeted him. All around him the thirty or so Ranger's were spread in a rag-tag huddle.

\_"Great," \_Kolby, the blonde from first squad said as he ducked out of the way of a needle from an angry Jackal. He popped out of his cover with the snow and fired twice with the M6J trying to discourage it from firing.

"Emerson! Watch the Shades!" Eric called out as he noticed his squadmate nearly taken out by a zealous grunt. She dove to the ground and Eric tossed a grenade that turned it into shrapnel seconds later.

There was a small barricade made out of deployable shields, crates, and rock with several shade Turrets dotting it. A barracks was in the center with a small communications array. In the middle was a large sentry tower.

\_"Jetpacks over the walls!" \_ Bowman called out again. \_"Giant on the left! Valkyrie, you've got the middle! Goblin, Cyclops, flank around!" \_

A chorus of yessirs was followed by simultaneous ignition of jetpacks as the group of thirty launched themselves into the night and over the wall straight into the panicked Covenant Camp.

Eric was fortunate to land on one of the Shade turrets that was laying down suppressing fire. The grunt manning it gave a squeal before Eric kicked it out. It flopped against the snow and fired its plasma weapon. He ducked and put a two second burst through its head. The other members of his squad arrived in similar fashion, gunning down Unngoy, Sangheili, and Kig-Yar alike. From their left they saw a dozen Elite's trying to marshal the defense.

It was clear to see how much off an impact 'Mdama had made on his cult. The rumors that were being circulated on whether he was dead or not were strong enough that it was made clear in the sloppy defense of the camp.

Where the Elite's would have been smart they were angry and fearful, some cowered attempting to surrender-to be shot by their own comrades, the Jackals seemed to band together and were on the verge of fleeing, the Unngoy were the only ones attempting a fight and were stealing Needlers and other weapons from the dead in an attempt to stop the 30 man army.

It was all in vain as Eric and the others swept through the camp quickly destroying the last enemy.

"I think that's the last of them." Mike Branley said as kicked over a corpse.

"Good work Ranger's." Bowman said surveying the inside of the fort. "Third squad take out the Barracks and the Comm tower. The rest of you look for the tunnel and the access panel.

"You know, for a fort that seemed rather under guarded." Branley observed.

"It's because we killed them all. What do you think?" Corporal Bauers laughed and the rest of the squad joined him.



"Sergeant Major?" asked Kyle Montgomery, who was the leader of Third Squad.

"What Corporal?"

"Where's that support we were promised?"

"I don't know. Why do you expect me to know?" he growled shouldering his MA37.

"..uh, I don't know?"

"How about you ask reeaal nice and maybe Hocus will drop you a Christmas present."

Montgomery sighed and awkwardly stepped to the side. With everyone gathering around him he attempted to raise Hocus.

\_"Third squad to Hocus, come in." \_

There was silence on the other end.

\_"Montgomery to Pelican Hocus, requesting Ordinance Drop." \_

Still more static on the other side.

"Spread out and find the tunnel." Bowman snapped.

"Come on Valkyrie, let's fan out and check over here." his CO said after a moment.

In the darkness they spread out into a straight line and began a sweep to the northwest.

\_"Pelican X-ray Zero-Zero-Niner-Bravo come in." \_

"Where do you suppose they are Julia?" Eric asked as they walked.

"I don't know? Maybe he's out of Radio range or the weather's not good?" she said uncertainly.

"Always the optimist." Specialist Mark Hanson said as he walked scanning the area for anything.

"Hey!" she protested angrily. "Would you rather Hocus be dead?" He shut up at once.

"I'd rather he just tell himself." protested Hanson quietly.

The group at this point had come face to face with the mountain side.

\_"Sergeant Major!" \_

\_"Go ahead Cyclops." \_

\_"We're picking up lots of Storm contacts on long range sensors." a female Ranger said.\_

\_"Anybody find the door?" \_ he asked impatiently

\_"No sir!" \_

\_"\*\*\*\*\*it! I need that door found and open now!" \_

\_"Sir, we need to open it within the next five minutes or we're all dead." \_

\_"Third squad! Are you done rigging everything to blow up!?" \_

A loud and concussive BOOM! illuminated the area with fiery orange and blue fire.

\_"There goes our position." \_

Eric noticed something out of the corner of his eye. To his left he thought he saw a layer of something drop off.

"Sergeant Major! I think I've found it!" he said rushing forward.

He soon saw through the mist a gaping circular hole that was disguised with a layer of ice and snow over parts and heavily weathered, the door looked to be inset farther into the mountain. He noticed then abandoned Covenant Tech surrounding a structure built into the side of a cliff.

"Corporal Bauers!" he called out motioning his CO forward.

He ran up to it and observed the same thing.

"Valkyrie! Get over here and search that structure. Hanson, Emerson, you're with me."

The rest cautiously approached the structure with weapons drawn and raised.

"Stack up!" the Corporal ordered. "Gunther, you're on point!"

Eric complied feeling nervous and jittery as he they all took positions on the entrance and stormed through a narrow hallway.

"Clear!" he called out as the dark corridor opened up into a room overlooking the entrance of the tunnel which was lit up as soon as they entered the room on the otherside. It looked to be a large observation platform with a holographic panel.

Pale blue lighting illuminated it through the darkness of the fog and weather. It was a circular door that was utterly massive in size. He could not see the top of it but he knew that it must be large enough to fit a ship through here, otherwise there wouldn't be a ship trapped inside.

\_"Second squad, figure out to open the doors? We're short on time!" \_  
\_Bowman said interrupting their observations.

"These don't look like normal glyphs Sergeant Major!" Emerson called out as she scrolled through.

"Hey, what's with all the ash on the floor?" Haverty asked pointing

at several large piles on the floor.

\_"Figure it out! I don't have time for-"\_

Eric noticed a flash of red on the other side of the hallway on the basic motion trackers built into his helmet as he watched the back door.

"Guys! We got contacts!" he said snapping his gun up to bear.

\_"Where?" \_snapped Bowman.

A sudden flash of light and a metallic, insectoid, creature materialized on the other side of the hallway where it promptly charged forward with a shriek until Eric shot it through its gleaming skull before it dissolved into light and ash very similar to that on the ground. Three more wolf-like Prometheans materialized as well with flashes.

"\*\*\*\*it! Prometheans!" cursed Haverty as he dove out of the way of a beam of red light that almost decapitated him forward.

"Weapons free!" Bauers called out! "Emerson, start pressing buttons! Get this door open!"

"On it!" she called out and smacked her hand over a holographic button.

A loud hiss was heard from behind them.

"Got it!" she cried.

\_"Doors open! Get your \*\*\*\*\* inside here Valkyrie! All squads to me!"  
\_Bowman called out in response confirming that the door did in fact open.

Eric ducked as a ricocheting burst of light bounced off the walls and nearly killed him.

"Somebody get this guy off me!" he yelled frustrated as he attempted to return fire.

He was saved by Emerson who clutching a DMR fired one handed around the corner and took the down the offending Promethean with a lucky shot causing it to twitch and shriek until it was nothing.

"Thanks!" he called out firing a burst until the gun clicked empty at a Promethean that had gotten too close.

"Reloading!"

"Frag out!" Haverty called out throwng a grenade down the hallway which thinned their numbers slightly as the clap of thunder turned three into ash.

"Get down!" Eric yelled as he noticed one carrying what looked to be a missile launcher of sorts emerge from behind its disintegrated comrades.

The others did so immediately and just in time as it moved to the forefront and fired its weapon. A loud CRACK! and the hallway was filled with a globular ball of light that soared down the hallway and collided with the opposite wall where it detonated creating a massive hole in the side of it exploding outwards as well.

A loud scream distracted him for a second.

"\*\*\*\*!" Haverty is hit! Hit him in the foot!" Luke yelled shielding Haverty from more harm.

Haverty yelled again to prove this already obvious point.

"Emerson get him out of fire and look at that foot!" Corporal Bauers yelled at Emerson, their resident medic.

"Corporal we should get out of here!" Eric said reloading a magazine and emptying it into the Promethean that was 10 feet away. The rest of the team was able to bottle up the enemy to some degree with a combination of frag grenades and gunfire.

"How bad is it?" Eric yelled over the commotion as he accepted a magazine of ammo as he bent back to reload again.

"Not good! His foot's missing, Knight cauterized though with the explosive. We need to leave if we're going to get out of here alive!"

"Why haven't we left?" Branley asked putting down a Crawler with another burst.

There was a temporary lull in the fighting for a moment after he said that.

"We're clear!" Haverty gasped out.

"Well I vote we leave now!" Eric said.

"Fine, Gunther! Give us some cover fire and we'll egress! Branley, help with Haverty over here!"

"Why me?"

"Do it!" Emerson snapped after a moment.

"Julia I'm kinda pinned down at the moment!" he snapped as another beam of light nearly bisected him.

She grunted fired four times and the fire slackened somewhat and she hoisted Haverty over her back.

"Everybody out!" the Corporal ordered. Eric backpedaled enough to give him a good view of the enemy still coming methodically down the hallway.

With some effort Julia hoisted Mike out the hole and dropped out, next Luke and the Corporal jumped out leaving Branley and himself.

"Why is it we're always the last ones? Come on, let's book it!"

The two turned and tossing individual grenades they ran and dove out the hole and onto the ground below.

As Eric dropped to the ground he noticed that there was a Phantom sitting too close for comfort on his right.

"Oh come on! Can't we get even a little-"

"What are you doing? Run!" Branley interrupted as a pair of Hunters roared and started charging their weapons.

They both ignited their jetpacks and avoided the projectiles hitting the ground again and running for the cave.

They started to run down a hill and within seconds were inside the cave created by the overhanging rock where they greeted the rest of the Platoon.

"About time." Bowman grumbled as the Rangers emerged from over behind several large rocks. "I'm all for leaving Prometheans to deal with the Storm. It's about time we have a break from fighting."

"Oorah!" some of the men chorused.

Now that Eric had a chance to catch his breath he noticed how big tunnel was up close. On all sides ice formed huge columns that extended until they vanished into the ceiling. And before them lay an immense dark expanse that seemed to stretch on and on.

"I don't suppose we have any other place to go right?" asked one of the men from Third Squad.

"That's a negative Private." stated Bowman walking into the center of the circle they had created. "We better hope the boys on the other side of this mountain are able to make more of this than we can. Get Haverty on his feet if you can, we need to keep moving. The Storm may be in full retreat but apparently there were some who didn't get the message. Let's move out before they decide to kill us."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC INFINITY BRIDGE:<br>\*\*

\*\*9:10:03 hours\*\*

\*\*\*\*Captain Thomas Lasky\*\*\*\*

"Captain Lasky?" Roland asked as he materialized in a flash of gold.

"What is it Roland?" he asked putting his hands over his head for a second before looking at the AI

"Admiral Tchkova just sent you a memo."

"And?"

"He's requesting permission to come aboard the Infinity. Says he has a package of sorts. You are to meet him in the Science wing in ten

minutes."

"That's all fine and good but what's wrong with the Dauntless?" he asked as he stared at the other ship which was making a large slow circle over top of the base."

"Nothing. He said Infinity has something that will make this mission a whole lot more classified then it is right now."

Tom racked his brains for a second.

"Wait you're not talking about the artifact that we found on Requiem right?"

"That's the one."

"But then that means..."

He remembered a conversation he had with Dr. Henry Glassman after their escape from the planet.

\_ "Doctor, what've you got?" \_he had asked when examining the object that Thorne had taken from them.

\_ "Well, th-the first test showed that it is inert. But... this part is really weird." \_

Glassman had clicked on a screen above them, which then showcased microscopic images of the key's structure.

\_ "On a molecular level, it's incomplete. Jus-it makes no sense." \_The doctor peered down at the tiny artifact inside the canister. \_ "It's like... It's like we're only seeing half of it." \_

\_ "Captain, I thought when the Doctor threw it to Thorne she had another half she was trying to shield." \_

\_ "So there are two then?" \_

Nobody had answered him.

\_ "Well this complicates things. Now we have even more reason to try and track down the Doctor." \_

He returned to the present in an instant.

"Oh \*\*\*\*\*!" he turned to the Bridge trying to conceal how Pale he had suddenly gone.

"XPO?"

Executive Petty Officer Henry Armstrong came up to him.

"Aye Captain?"

"I'm going to take a walk. I'll be back sometime. Let me know if anything happens."

"Aye Captain."

"Armstrong has the Bridge!" he announced to his crew. "I'm taking a walk."

He exited the bridge and started walking down to the Science Wing. He boarded one of the trams and spent the next two minutes riding to the Spartan Town. He had a hunch he needed to see one person before he left for the science wing.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes for a moment before composing himself physically, and then exited on to the deck overseeing the massive room full of ring like machines and Spartans returning from missions on the ground.

He went into the main office adjacent to the main corridor and tram stop before knocking.

"Come in." a female voice said.

"He opened the door and saw Commander Palmer in her Spartan issued undersuit standing over a desk looking at several papers."

"Tom? What's the occasion for visiting Spartan Town?"

"Sarah, do you have a few minutes? I need you to come with me."

"Yeah, I have a few minutes. I was just filing mission reports. Why?"

"Admiral Tchkova is meeting me in the Science Wing. I have no clue why but he hinted something big was up."

"Okay...?" she said cautiously. "Let's go. Best not to keep the Admiral waiting."

They both exited and walked towards the tram station.

"So, you have no idea?" asked Palmer again.

"I have a hunch. That's why I want you there as well."

"What about?"

"The artifact we recovered from Requiem."

"You mean the only thing good we got from it?"

He didn't respond to her remarks. That conversation could happen later.

"Did you know that there are apparently more of these Prometheans here?"

"They're also regarding every activity by everyone as hostile. These are not the ones that sided with the Storm."

The tram soon stopped at their destination and soon they both found themselves in one of the secondary corridors that the lab connected to.

"The Eggheads still trying to figure it out?"

"Glassman has made that his focus for now, so I guess."

He found his way to the lab where inside was stored the artifact and, typing the passcode in, entered in to see Dr. Glassman sitting down at a table making notes.

"Oh hello." he said noticing his arrival.

"Dr. Glassman. I'm sorry to have disturbed you."

"Oh uh it's fine. What brings you to the lab?"

"Actually the Admiral is coming here for something. I don't know why but he wants to meet here."

"Oh. Uhhh. Do I need to leave?" he asked gathering his stuff.

"No. I don't think so. Roland, where's the Admiral?"

\_"Outside the door."\_

Three sharp knocks were heard.

Lasky moved over and pushed the button to open the sliding door.

The Hungarian Admiral greeted him and Captain Lasky saluted before stepping to the side to let him pass. Palmer observed the scene with mild interest.

"I apologize for the short notice Captain but we have urgent matters to attend to." he said briskly.

"What-?"

But he motioned behind him and in stepped the last person he expected to see.

"Doctor Halsey?"

"How the-?"

"Oh my-"

"Before any of you pull a move or a gun out please let me make you aware that Doctor Halsey is indeed our friend. She has not been bugged, she does not belong to the Storm!" Tchkova interjected before anyone could make a move.

Lasky was thunder-struck.

"How did you escape?"

"I appreciate your concern for me Captain. But such tales can wait for the moment. Roland, please ensure this lab is secure."

\_"Secured." \_Roland's voice said over the room's PA.



She then reached in her pocket of her labcoat and pulled out with her good hand a mirror image of the object in the glass container sitting before them.

Dr. Glassman's breath hitched for a second, the only sound in the room.

"Is that..."

"This is the Janus Key, the secret treasure of Requiem." Dr. Halsey began. She opened the glass case and collected the other half.

"When both halves of it are brought together it will reveal..."

She brought the two halves together and they immediately clashed together like two opposite sides of a magnet and suddenly the room was filled with an expanse of holographic light and figures.

Everyone's reaction varied slightly.

Dr. Glassman had to clutch the side of his desk for support, Palmer stood alarmed and unsure of what to do. Lasky stared open mouthed and the Admiral mouthed an expletive.

"...the location of every piece of Forerunner technology in the universe."

She reached and manipulated it until there was a single solitary dot.

"Roland? Please read the astrological data on this and tell us where it is."

\_"Working on it. Wait, Doctor, there's no need, we're already here."

><em>

"How?" Palmer asked still eying Doctor Halsey with some degree of anticipation and wariness.

"This planet, Cryptum, not only contains, as rumor would have it a UNSC vessel, but also the Absolute Record."

"What is that?" Dr. Glassman asked reaching out and grasping a dot that had slipped back into the picture and eyed it with wonder.

"During my conversation with the Librarian-yes, I'll fill you in on that in due time, she told me this was the place to be able to propel mankind forward. This planet contains the \_full\_ data on every artifact and gift the Forerunner's have given us. A library, so to speak, given to us for our benefit."

She pulled apart the keys and the images collapsed and vanished at once.

"And it's inside that mountain?"

Dr. Halsey was about to continue when several alarms and lights began

flashing and blaring.

"Roland what's going on?"

\_"Captain, you are required on the bridge ASAP by Executive Officer Armstrong. He says it's urgent."\_

"On my way Roland, thank you."

"Captain?" Palmer asked.

"Roland? What's the problem anyways?"

\_"We are receiving reports that the mountain is opening. The Ranger's made it through."\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>So, what did you think? This chapter was split in half from the one I originally wanted to write. I can promise you in the next chapter Will's world is going to flip upside down.<br>\_

\_I appreciated your patience and the messages of support that were given with my PSA. I thank you for your time in making this the story it is currently. \_

\_\*\*For those interested in what the Easter Eggs were:\*\*\_

><em>

\_William Gunther, while not related to Welkin Gunther from Valkyria Chronicles, Will's name is a little bit of an Easter Egg, though unintentional.\_

Emerson from Eric's team is based physically, and name wise, on Jacqueline Emerson who played Foxface in the Hunger Games

\_Sadie's story is referenced by bringing Officer Branley and Sadie Endesha into the story. After all what is Halo without this little-known story?  
><em>

\_The Dauntless is a running gag to one of the Factions in Divergent\_

\_Bowman is a reference to a Character in COD\_

\_Mason, another character also lives in Alaska like the Mason from COD.\_

\_Many thanks to my wonderful betas \*\*Lord Razer, gwb99, archwar, and ArcCaptainFordo \*\*for sticking with me on this chapter and to \*\*Mandalore the freedom \*\*for bouncing back ideas and helping me with writers bloc.  
><em>

\_If you are interested in being a beta please drop a Private Message. Suggestions and ideas for stuff you would like to see is always appreciated as well. It helps me think of new material for writing.

—

\_Please remember to read and leave a review!\_

\_Yours in writing,  
><em>

\*\*\_theotherpianist\_\*\*

## 14. Chapter 14

\_Hello! \*\*theotherpianist \*\*welcomes you back! Are you ready for another chapter because I'm sure ready to post one! \_

\_But first as a PSA\*\*:\*\*\_

\_On November 18th, \*\*Halo: Rise of the Empire \*\*crossed the \*\*50,000\*\* view marker and the \*\*100,000 \*\*word count! Many thanks are due to those of you who have stuck through my writing in the beginning! \_

\_To those of you are asking me I \*\*do\*\* plan on doing a rewrite of the beginning but I would like to complete this book first before I move on to the second installment. I would like to apologize for being late in posting this. Consider this a Christmas (if you celebrate it) treat if you will. If not then please enjoy this a random gift. I have been extremely busy with school work. That is all I can say on the matter. But let us move on to reviews!\_

\*\*\_Legionary Prime:\_\*\*\_I have no idea about if the Chief will show up. The idea was based solely on a OC character that struggles to make it through some of the toughest points in galactic history. I hesitate to do the Chief solely because I have no idea what 343 Industries plans to do. This is my story but I like to confine it to established canon when possible. Will he show up? Yes. But I can't decide in what way. \_

\*\*\_Mandalore the freedom: \_\*\*\_There will be Mandalorians and more exploration of Zek's character. All good things come to those who wait.\_

\_For this chapter I decided to cover more of the events going on outside to give perspective to forthcoming events.\_

\_And now, please enjoy the show.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC INFINITY (INF-101)<br>\*\*

\*\*BRIDGE\*\*

\*\*Cryptum, Wild Space Regions\*\*

\*\*Captain Thomas Lasky,\*\*

\*\*Dec 9th, 2552: 9:15:56 Hours Standard UNSC Military Calendar/Time\*\*

"XPO, what's our situation?" Captain Lasky asked as he hurried in, trailed by Doctor Halsey, Spartan Palmer, and the Admiral.

"The mountain side started opening five minutes ago. It's still doing so, look!" Executive Petty Officer Henry Armstrong said pointing a finger.

He went over to one of the observation windows and looked. Below him a large circular hole was opening up, massive in diameter, that was opening up as if to swallow the Infinity. He knew and mentally reminded himself they were in no danger of that, UNSC Forces had already disabled the mechanisms that captured ships and pulled them inside. The sight still reminded him very much of Requiem.

And he would love nothing more than to not repeat that again.

He shivered unconsciously at the thought. Why did Forerunners make giant holes anyways?

"Captain Lasky? Fleetmaster 'Vadum on the line! We've got trouble!" Roland reported.

"Captain? I trust you can handle things on the Infinity?" Admiral Tchкова interrupted him.

"Yes Admiral, hold on-Roland what kind of trouble?"

"It looks like a lot more of a Storm fleet. Whatever is inside there must be valuable enough that they're willing to throw an entire fleet at it!" an Officer called out.

The Admiral next to him swore as the holo-table lit up with the new contacts.

"Sensors make out contacts as 3 RCS Heavy Cruisers with 15 CRS Light Cruisers, make that five per Heavy." \_Roland said.

"More Contacts!"

"Nevermind, add **\*\*two \*\***Assault Carrier and four CCS class cruisers to the mix shall we?" \_Roland said sarcastically. His avatar glowing darkly as he contemplated the new arrival.

"What could possibly be so important to throw their entire fleet at us?!" someone yelled as they passed by Lasky.

"They still don't know. Darn it Lasky! Pull yourself together!"

><em>

"Captain, I'm going to rotate the Dauntless out and pull some lighter vessels down here for support. We received reinforcements and resupply minutes ago. I need to coordinate them with the Sangheili. Good luck. You know what to do." the Admiral said interrupting his thoughts. He had briefed him on what he wanted to happen seconds before they had gotten here to the bridge.

He saluted and Lasky returned it as the Admiral ran as fast as he could out of the bridge and onto a transport, a cadre of ODST's around him.

"Roland, transmit an open message to all friendly forces."

"Aye Captain. Recording in three...two...one..." he gave a thumbs up and Lasky spoke.

"Attention all Allied Species Forces. This is Captain Lasky with a message for all personnel. The nature of our assignment here on Yukon, now designated Cryptum, has become much more severe and important than we have realized."

Across the Bridge the frantic communications stopped as they all turned to look at their Captain.

"Inside that mountain lies the source of the UNSC distress signals but also at the same time something much more valuable to any of us. Knowledge. Inside that mountain, that crypt, lies the Absolute Record."

He took a breath for a moment before dropping the bombshell.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Spartan Thorne<strong>

\_"This, is the key to every piece of Forerunner Technology in the universe. It's all here. Everything cataloged in one single location."\_

Thorne cursed as he nearly lost his balance on the gun as the Warthog he was in swerved.

\_"Did he just say-?" \_

\_"Every piece?"\_

\_"Mother of-"\_

\_"Holy-"\_

\_"Shut it Majestic!" \_DeMarco hissed.

\_ "And we, thanks to the efforts of Dr. Catherine Elizabeth Halsey who has been recovered from captivity with the Storm, were able to confirm this. Here and now in the next few hours will determine our fate as a galaxy, as brothers and sisters, as friends. Our task is now of even greater importance and urgency... \_

"Hoya, you better step on it. We're still a kilometer from the tunnel!"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Spartan William Gunther<br>\*\*

He stopped his walk towards the center of the FOB at the foot of the tunnel, now wide open to look back at the Infinity overhead. The Dauntless next to it ignited its engines and started ascending rapidly. While he watched other reinforcement vessels sink lower to take the place of the Infinity.

\_ "...our enemy is not done nor is he finished. While we were almost certainly able to critically wound Jul 'Mdama almost an hour ago, his forces are still zealous, loyal, and are evidently bent on revenge.

-

"Hey Will, what's going-"

"Here." he said in a daze tossing a disposable comlink to Chelsea who was currently replacing her com unit on her helmet that had been damaged in their fight with 'Mdama.

\_ "Our future, depends on whether we are able to secure the information and personal inside there as fast as possible. And in addition Admiral Tchikova has asked me to make one more announcement." \_ He cleared his throat. And Will paused listening with the hosts of other UNSC personal

\_ "It's a half truth that for the sake of security we needed to cover up. There are not one but two ships inside that mountain. And one of them...is the Spirit of Fire." \_

"What?! Chelsea said snatching the comlink again as she dropped it in surprise.

"Did he just-"

\_ "Communication patterns match frequencies unique to UNSC Naval ships almost 30 years ago. A quick reference to those in service before the Spirit of Fire vanished confirmed our theories." \_Lasky said interrupting Will.

"Ho-ly crap." Will said as Lasky was trying to explain the significance of this find.

"Guess we were right when we decided to throw this much men and material to one planet. The public is going to have kittens." Chelsea chuckled.

"The Politicians and Brass can deal with the fallout."

"Anymore revelations from Lasky?"

"Shhh."

\_ "We have also confirmed recently through a series of scans that the other ship down there is the UNSC Svalbard. A vessel declared missing with 5000 men and women during a tactical retreat in the fight against the Storm.\_

"What?!" It was Will's turn to yelp in surprise. He swooned slightly on the spot as a wave of euphoria crashed over him as two words registered in his mind.

\_UNSC Svalbard\_

"Do you know what this means?!" Chelsea said becoming more ecstatic by the second

"Castle?" he said a grin spreading across his face.

"Castle."

"Race you to the mountain!"

"You're on Will."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Shadow of Intent<br>\*\*

\*\*Bridge\*\*

\*\*Fleetmaster Rtas 'Vadum,\*\*

\*\*9:20:00 Hours\*\*

"Fleetmaster! We're being hailed by Admiral Tchkova."

Rtas 'Vadum sat in the grav-chair with a hand underneath his mandibles as he observed the Storm Reinforcements start to organize. He looked up at the Sangheili who had called him up.

"Go ahead."

A screen above him blinked on with the face of the Admiral.

"Fleetmaster. I assume you know of the Storm rearing its face again?"

"More than I would care for at the moment." he grimaced staring at the fleet.

"Do we have the numbers to take them on right now?"

"We do but we put ourselves at great risk. With a Carrier of their own over there they've forced us to be patient. We could fight them but, as one of you have famously said, 'Discretion is the better part of valor.' Am I correct?"

"You are. I'm scraping as many ships off the surface as I can but they have us in a hard spot. And yet while we wait they set themselves up for deployment of troops below. You've just heard Captain Lasky's speech correct?"

"Indeed I have." Rtas looked at a screen to his left that was scrolling text on repeat of Lasky's speech. "The presence of the Absolute Record is troubling. Why here of all places."

"We won't know that until later. The Republic hasn't shown up?"

"No. I dearly hope they're not breaking their vows." Rtas said angrily.

"What is your Fleet's status?"

"During the first round my ships sustained some minor injuries that still have yet to be repaired. My warriors are more than willing to give battle to any heretic that stands against us."

"Fleetmaster! The enemy is advancing!" a young Officer called out.

"Prepare yourself Admiral, for we have a long fight ahead of us. I'm pulling my lines back to mix with yours."

"Roger. We'll be in touch."

The connection closed.

"Weapons! Charge plasma turrets and wait for my command. Stagger our ships among the UNSC line but I want our heavier firepower on our flanks."

He fell silent as his crew relayed orders and

"Fleetmaster, they're sending their lighter warships out first."

He looked at the screen and saw not the Light Cruisers but the Battle Cruisers leading the charge. It had to be a trap. He thought back to his days at the Academy where he had studied history. The Sangheili had a saying proverb about traps. In essence, one could never know until one tried it out for sure for himself. Better to spring one now then later and be surprised. And who wasn't to say you could respond to a trap with your own?"

It was time to spring it now.

"Helm, launch fighters but keep them in reserve on our lines and move the Shadow of Intent forward."

"Aye."

He watched as his Carrier moved forward to intercept the four warships. They started splitting apart.

"All weapons, prepare to fire! On my command."

"Fleetmaster, they're moving into staggered formation within range and launching fighters!"

He allowed a grin as he saw the enemy move for his own trap

"Fire at will! Torpedoes on our diagonals!"

"On our diagonals?" one of the Crew asked.

The diagonals referred to 45 degree imaginary lines that extended out from the ends of the ship. An attacking ship would have its best chance in destroying a vessel by attacking a ship along those lines because the shields were configured in such a way as to absorb more damage from anything head on or broadside. The diagonals were harder to defend but the presence of an energy projector negated that advantage.

"Just do it!" another Sangheili roared.

The ship vibrated as the turrets, red from plasma heat opened up and started spewing lances in very precise directions and plasma



torpedoes launched with no apparent guidance.

"Slipspace jumps on our diagonals!" Navigation called out as additional ships now appeared in a diagonal box around the Shadow of Intent.

"They outnumber us eight to one!"

"Then it is a fair fight. All weapons fire again! Burn the heretics! Reload torpedoes and launch again."

The enemy battlecruisers that had just appeared suddenly tried veering off course as they realized there was plasma in their path.

Four torpedoes collided with four ships. Rtas had been counting on them to try and surround his ship and as four plasma charges met the hulls of four different ships he took full advantage of the critical milliseconds after a slipspace jump that the shields of a ship, if not gone, were weakened as they tried to recharge.

The Storm, with their slipspace drives cooling down and with no immediate maneuverability were, as the humans liked to say, sitting ducks. Four plasma charges slammed into the hulls with such an impact that they flared and stopped for a second before bursting into chaining series of explosions.

The cloud of Seraphs, Banshees and Phantoms thinned as the pulse lasers came alive from every angle and started thinning out the cloud of enemy fighters. Behind them the four battlecruisers that had originally advanced were in a full retreat. Followed quickly by the fighters.

"After them! Burn their ships!" he called out as the

The crew growled in approval as the Shadow of Intent raced forward. Her plasma turrets sending calculated volleys of plasma toward the fleeing Storm.

Yet something in Rtas's mind was not at ease. He had not fought the Parasite and more battles than he could count for nothing. Something wasn't right. But what? The Storm were in fact legitimately fleeing, almost killing each other to get away from the Assault Carrier.

Better safe than sorry at any rate.

"Hold!" he called out suddenly standing up.

His crew looked up at him.

"Turn this ship around."

"Fleetmaster! I'm picking up contacts moving at faster...than light..." one of the Crew said and faltered.

"Show me!" he ordered at once to where the Sangheili had pointed. A large red mass was moving towards them at high speeds.

"What is-"

"Contact!" a Sangheili behind him roared.

"Doesn't match any we've seen before!"

"On screen!"

He paused to take in what he was seeing. The ship reminded him of an energy sword vaguely. There were two pronged tips making up the prow. A large ring like structure was dully glowing on one side of the ship. From there it flattened it out into a large tubular section bristling with guns. At the end a large tower jutted backwards, most likely, he thought, the command tower.

He noticed a large blue and white symbol painted on the side of it.

"Confederacy." he snarled.

\_"But who could be on the bridge?"\_ he wondered.

"Hail that ship!"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Malevolence II <strong>

\*\*Bridge,\*\*

\*\*Wild Space Regions\*\*

\*\*Planet, Separatist Designation "Lockup"\*\*

"General! Scanners show two fleets near the Planet. One side looks to be in retreat." said a Battle Droid from his console station.

General Grievous scanned the space he and the Malevolence was occupying in the middle of a battlefield with light casualties coming from what only could be the Storm's fleet. The other side had a retreating ship the same size as the Malevolence

"Hail both fleet's." he coughed after a moment.

"Roger roger."

He stepped backwards and composed himself.

"General. The Commander of that ship is turning about and hailing us.

"Answer them." he said coldly.

The Hologram of a large reptilian looking alien who was missing two of four mandibles greeted him.

\_"Greetings. I am Fleetmaster Rtas 'Vadum of the Swords of Sangheilios which are a part of-"\_

"I know who you are Fleetmaster." the General said scathingly. "I am

General Grievous of the Confederacy of Independent Systems. With orders to negotiate your surrender or the terms of your execution. Whichever you prefer." he coughed loudly before straightening again.

\_"Then General, we are at an impasse. I have been charged to keep this planet under our control while our brothers of the UNSC search for survivors. We do not wish to seek conflict at this time General. Our mission is humanitarian, NOT totalitarian. And do not idle my time with false threats of surrender. I've heard and seen your history. Do not take me for a fool."\_

Grievous laughed. "Then we are left with no choice-"

"General! The Storm are moving into attack formations!"

He turned away for a moment at the incessant cry of the battle droid to realize they were doing exactly that.

"Rarrgh!" he growled as he watched one of the ships the size of his own leading that charge. "Begin charging plasma rotors!" he growled at his Weapons Officer.

The droid responded with trademark efficiency.

"Fleetmaster, you are about to get a taste of what will happen in the very near future. I am being merciful. I suggest you take it now. Leave the UNSC to their fate. It would be better for them than you."

\_"We can not do that abomination." \_Rtas said coldly.

"General, the Storm is charging weapons!" another one of his pathetic crew called out slightly panicking.

"Firing sequence initiated!" another droid called out.

To his right ahead of him a large disc of purple ionic energy began forming.

"Rotate the Malevolence!" Grievous ordered.

The Malevolence II shifted itself broadside and the disc began expanding more and more.

"Cannon ready!" Weapons called out.

"Fire!"

With a dull roar the cannon fired and a spinning, churning ring of energy burst out clawing its way outwards expanding as it went. The Storm Vessels tried breaking ranks. The ones on the outside were lucky and narrowly avoided it and raced back to their depleted lines. The Ion pulse raced and the largest vessel and her smaller escorts plunged into the middle of it.

There were silver and gold pops as the shielding was disabled all over the enemy fleet and the ships lost power.

"Fire all cannons!" the cyborg General roared pointing with a finger

at the crippled ships.

He felt a sense of sadistic glee as numerous bolts of energy streaked towards the helpless ships. They blossomed into hellish flowers of flame on impact.

The Storm, to the credit of the designers of the ships were able to shake off the damage for half a minute until they all started to burst into flame. Bulkheads were ripped open, chunks of armor blasted apart and vaporized, oxygen turned into flames in milliseconds, occupants roasted instantly or asphyxiated from lack of air, decks were sucked out from depressurization, ghostly clouds and contrails of debris, plasma, and oxygen,

The biggest highlight was when the largest vessel suddenly shuddered and exploded outwards as its reactor went critical and blasted the other wreckage away.

"Have you changed your mind Fleetmaster?"

\_"But you have but one ship."\_

"Not any more barbarian scum."

And then all around him was filled with Separatist warships. Lucrehulks, Providence class Carriers and Destroyers, Rescuer Light Destroyers, Munificent Star Frigates, and Saboteur class Destroyers.

If the Fleetmaster was afraid he didn't show it. His face didn't show a trace of fear that was ever present in one of the Republic's Admirals. Oh what he would even give to have any Jedi witness this.

\_"You underestimate us General."\_ Fleetmaster 'Vadum said. \_ "This conversation has no more meaning.\_" With that the connection broke.

"General the Storm are retreating!" a Battle Droid called out enthusiastically.

"Move the fleet into position. How much longer until the Ion Cannon can be used?"

"According to my calculations the cannon will be ready in 25 minutes."

Grievous growled angrily. "And why not?"

"Uhh...well if we fire prematurely we risk damaging the cannon permanently."

"Move the fleet into position. I want to land troops as soon as possible on the ground."

"Roger roger."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC Dauntless (DBD-312)<strong>

**\*\*Bridge\*\***

**\*\*Planetary Orbit of Cryptum\*\***

**\*\*9:30:08 Hours\*\***

"Can anyone tell me what the \*\*\*\* they just fired?" Admiral Tchkova said peering the observation windows towards the third enemy fleet that day. As much as he wanted to bloody the Separatists his game plan had just been changed dramatically in the last thirty seconds.

"Working on it sir!"

"\*\*\*\*it I need answers now!"

"Admiral? I have your answer." a female voice spoke up.

"Finally. Hit me Sarah." Tchkova said turning to the pedestal where Sarah had materialized.

"Do you want simple or complex terms?"

"Einstein."

"Very well. It would appear that warship fired a class five pulse of negatively charged ionic energy contained within a destabilizing and expanding EMP field. The actual damage was done by the ionized particles contained in the field. When the EMP field hit, it disabled the shields. The ionic particles took care of the rest of the process and took everything else electronic off line. The heat produced most likely melted several key components of the ship power grid and then proceeded to irreparably damage all systems."

Tchkova let that sit for a second.

"Wait. The Dauntless, isn't it hardened to this type of thing because of the EMP cannon onboard?"

"Yes and no Admiral. While it is resistant to a class three electromagnetic pulse that does nothing to mitigate or prevent damage caused by the ionized particles or the accompanying class five EMP pulse."

"Admiral that ship is turning about to face us! The fleet is splitting to attack them and us!"

"\*\*\*\*it Sarah how do we survive another one of those?"

"We can't." she said after a moment. "Not where you stand now."

"That ship is turning toward us Captain!" one of the Bridge crew called out nervously.

"Calm down son." Tchkova turned and said to panicking Petty Officer. He put his elbows down on the holotable and rubbed his temples and stared at the oncoming fleet. It was almost like fighting the Covenant way back when he had been a Captain. He knew he had to be

optimistic but reasonable.

What could a group consisting of the Infinity, Dauntless, Eight Autumn class cruisers, six destroyers, four light carriers, two light battleships, and ten frigates. He had sent many of his original ships back to Coruscant too early and even with a smaller replacement fleet he was very unhappy with his numbers.

"Tell the ground teams they have a limited amount of time before the enemy is all over us. We can't cover their escape if we're cut off."

She nodded and was about to turn away when Tchkova stopped her.

"The Republic's doctor, Doctor Yallat, where is she?" he asked suddenly.

"She is aboard the Infinity in the medical ward undergoing-"

"Never mind that." he interrupted her confusion. "I need her input. Hail Infinity and see if we can get her on the line."

He turned away and looked over the enemy fleet slowly approaching them. He wasn't concerned about the smaller vessels, during the battle of Rhen Var the Dauntless had proved itself against many of the smaller vessels. Granted the Dauntless almost destroyed its slipspace drive during the fight but it came out on top during the fight. What he was concerned about was the larger vessels, Providence class ships that were almost as large as the Dauntless.

"Admiral? She's on the line." said Sarah.

He turned to the holoprojector which now displayed an image of Doctor Yallat in a hospital bed sitting up.

"Sorry to disturb you Doctor. I'm Admiral Tchkova, the commander of the UNSC forces on this planet. I hate to interrupt your recovery Doctor but we are in rather dire straits."

"Understood. Tell me what this problem is." \_she said straightening up.

"The Confederacy just came out of hyperspace with this ship." A 3D image of the largest ship was displayed.

"You mean the Malevolence?" \_

"The Republic has seen this before?"

"Yes, briefly. If I recall Jedi Master Plo Koon was investigating a Separatist superweapon in the Abregado system which turned out to be the Malevolence. It had a ion cannon that has left entire fleets helpless while General Grievous slaughtered them. It was only due to the intervention of Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi that they survived and were able to reveal the identity of the weapon." \_

"Is there anyway to negate the cannon?" he asked quickly.

"I...uhh...well no." \_ she said. \_"We destroyed the vessel by

sabotaging its Navicomputer from inside. There's no way to shield yourself unless your vessels are built to withstand such things."

—

The Admiral let the sink for a moment.

"Thank you doctor. We wish you a quick and speedy recovery. Admiral out."

He turned away and started pacing around in front of his main observation window trying to figure out some strategy.

In the distance now the Confederacy was pushing on the storm. Multicolored explosions obscured part of the scene trailing out in long ghostly ribbons of light that looked like the northern lights he had seen on Reach.

Suddenly an idea emerged. His ships might not be shielded but there were natural shields at his disposal.

"Sarah, the atmosphere of this planet. Does it have a magnetosphere?"

Sarah had caught on in an instant and was already one step ahead of him.

"The atmosphere from my readings should be able to disperse the ionized particles enough that we should have no serious damage if we move our fleet deep enough within atmosphere."

"But that seriously hampers our maneuverability, they'll force us to the ground." he said frowning.

"But we will have negated their ion cannon." she said.

"Let's just hope that we can match their fleet in atmosphere up close." He turned away from the window. "Helm! Move the fleet closer to the planet's atmosphere."

"What? Say again Admiral?"

"Move the fleet into lower atmosphere as soon as that monster gets close. We can negate that ion cannon on the enemy vessel."

"Aye Admiral!"

That taken care of he strode over to another station and looked at the fleet's position.

"We're not moving a \*\*\*\* meter unless we absolutely have to." he said clenching his teeth. "That understood?"

The bridge chorused in agreement.

"Sarah where is the Republic's reinforcements we were supposed to have received?"

"Unknown. They were supposed to have shown five minutes ago."

"Admiral, contacts are in range of the MAC!" Weapons Officer Ensign Garrett Silverstone called out.

"Prioritize targets by threat level and open up with the MAC gun!" he called out.

"Send off a message. Let them know that we need immediate assistance."

"I'll do what I can Admiral but there's only so much we can do."

"Sir! Enemy fleet closing positions fast!" Weapons called out.  
"Multiple objects peeling away from enemy ships!"

"Analyze!" he ordered.

"Scans show multiple fighters incoming! They've brought boarding craft, and lots of 'em too!" Weapons called out.

"Give the order for all ships to go to full combat alert and prepare for boarders. I want our fighters in close range of our ships."

A new alarm was added to the mix of klaxons and other sirens that blared throughout the ship.

"Our cruisers have a shot!" Ensign Silverstone called out.

"Give them a volley!" he called out.

"Aye sir!" Silverstone responded.

From around him all UNSC ships turned and oriented themselves towards targets before sending their lethal payload of shells accelerated to a respectable fraction of the speed of light. The Dauntless only shook slightly as its guns were added to the mix.

A blink of an eye saw twenty two explosions blossom into fire as the high velocity rounds penetrated the shields of an advance guard of Munnificent Star Frigates and impacted on their reactions. The other ships that were not decimated were simply sheared apart from kinetic force, their hulls tumbling and venting atmosphere and parts.

"Kills confirmed Admiral!" Sangheili moving to cover our flanks!"

He glanced to his left and saw the Sangheili moving some of their ships lower into orbit to prevent anything from entering atmosphere.

There were still many more ships behind that steamed past the wreckage of the fallen and that behemoth, the Malevolence or whatever it was called, was steaming closer and closer.

"Admiral?" a Petty Officer hailed him.

He strode over quickly to a sensor scan station.

"They're launching more ships and I'd be willing to bet my entire year's pay those are troop deployment vehicles."



He looked again at the fleet and saw a score of larger objects behind the still approaching fleet with their fighters and boarding craft.

"Dear..." he trailed off. He looked over to the Sangheili who were in a position to do something and strode over to the holotable.

" Sarah? I want a message sent to the Fleetmaster, they are to intercept as many of those landing craft as possible! If those things land this entire campaign could be shut down."

"Done sir." she answered. "Boarding craft are two minutes out."

"All hands prep for boarding!" he called out.

"Enemy fleet firing weapons!" another Weapons officer called out.

"Brace yourselves!" he ordered.

The ruby bolts from the enemy fleet traversed the distance much slower than a MAC round but their ability to damage was not lost upon the Admiral. With a flash they collided with the fleet. The Dauntless bucked and shook as the energy dissipated on the shields for 15 seconds and Dean Tchkova felt his neck jerk around a little more than he would have liked.

"Status!" he coughed as he regained posture.

"Shields still holding at 83%. Getting damage report from the rest of the-"

"\*\*\*\*! Another Officer called out. The Pontificus is not responding!"

He looked over to see the Pontificus...or rather what had been.

What was left was a mangled hulk that somewhat resembled a Destroyer drifting aimlessly with leaking reactors spiraling like a bullet trailing debris, frozen oxygen, and bodies. With a flash what was left jettisoned escape pods. It was made quickly apparent that the presence of light shielding did nothing to save it.

"Pull back our lighter class ships, supporting roles only! I want them out of the line of fire.

"Sustained enemy fire! Incoming!"

"Evasive actions now!" Launch Archer Pods 1-50 and open up with our secondary armaments!"

"Done-Incoming fighters!"

"Get the AAA on it stat! Prioritize boarding craft and bombers and let them have it!"

The Dauntless hummed and fired with secondary gun emplacements including Onagers and a wave of missiles that took advantage of the fighter cloud swarming towards them and several Confederate ships that had their shields down. The missiles impacted deep within the

ships and exploded ballooning them outwards until they burst sending fire out the sides and blowing ships apart.

The Confederacy had one advantage that they were pressing heavily. Multiple primary weapon emplacements meant that they could keep up an infinite salvo (provided that they were conservative in their firing which at the moment they were not.) The Admiral jerked again as the Dauntless stumbled again. The crew flinched when two Frigates fell to the Separatist's in quick succession.

"Shields at 70% now!"

"Weapons, fire the EMP cannon! Sarah coordinate the MAC with it. Kill as much as possible. I don't care whether its partial charge."

From underneath the ship a cannon began taking electromagnetic energy generated by the shields and shaping it into a pulse that was inserted into the tip of the shell that was smaller than a standard MAC round. The ships lights flickered and it fired. The round flew towards a Providence class Battleship that was coming closer than anybody preferred. The round struck the shield where instantly the EMP pulse exploded outwards disabling the shields clearing the way for the round which gutted the ship in an instant shearing through the Bridge and decapitating the jutting tower on the back.

The explosion that resulted literally blew it to atoms as the reactors turned it into a supernova enveloping two smaller ships flanking it.

The MAC round that followed soared through the center of the explosion to strike a large Lucrehulk class Battleship in the center where it was instantly vaporized as its reactors went critical.

The bridge cheered and the Separatists slowed their advance and started zigzagging patterns backwards that would give them protection at the cost of speed still unleashing a frightening amount of fire towards the UNSC.

"The fleet is regrouping!"

"Hold the line! Give the ground as much time as possible!" Tchkova yelled.

\_"I sure hope the ground is having better luck than we are."\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Spartan William Gunther<strong>

\*\*Interior of the Mountain,\*\*

\*\*Cryptum, Wild Space Regions\*\*

\*\*9:32:00 Hours UNSC Standard Military Time/Calendar\*\*

"Hold!" he ordered suddenly crouching in the shadows. Behind him Chelsea paused as well and covered their backs with the shotgun cradled in her arms.

They had been put into contact with Infinity's Spartan IV handlers

(it was ironic to Will that Spartans now served the purpose of talking to other Spartans through their missions and served in an advisory role) when they had arrived at Base Camp. The tunnel had one gigantic hole yes, but branching off from it was a myriad of others that held no other purpose save to slow them down.

Per protocol no stone could be left unturned in a rescue situation and so many of the Spartan IV "Fireteams" as they were called were diverted off to explore while a Joint Army/Spartan team pushed forward in the larger tunnel. Even with so many people down here progress was agonizingly slow.

"How's it going down there Castle?" \_the voice of their Handler, a Spartan named Dalton crackled in their ears.

"Peachy." Will said under his breath.

"I'm sorry say again Castle Lead?"\_

"We're fine Dalton\_. \_Thought I heard something."

"There still are isolated reports of Promethean activity. Fireteam Crimson just reported a lone Knight on the opposite side as you guys. But where there is one there's bound to be more. Keep an eye out."\_

"Will do."

"Thanks. Dalton out."\_

"Will, we should keep moving. This passage is giving me the creeps." Chelsea said from behind him.

"What, a giant forerunner maze isn't enough for you?" he said raising his left arm to the square and waving his fingers forward.

"No." she said as she walked by him keeping an eye on their rear. "Its the winding, totally in the dark part of these side corridors. Come on, how are we supposed to find anything in this?"

"You sound like Ripa." Will said shaking his head.

"Where is he anyway?"

"He's probably somewhere with the other Sangheili ships. Special Operation teams aren't called in for party favors or on a whim. They're saved until they are absolutely deemed necessary to be deployed. That's what he said to me at any rate."

Silence filled the corridor for just a second or two more as the two armored figures moved as fast as they could while maintaining silence. Will moved the FS2000 in his hands from left to right for a second before making a right hand turn and following the corridor.

The corridor suddenly widened out significantly to around 15 feet wide. And the presence of blue white light in this section did little to shake Chelsea's wariness of the place.

That was only enhanced as a solid metal clang suddenly startled them

from somewhere behind him.

They both spun around and pointed their weapons towards the sound.

"What was that?" Will asked not amused with the sudden surprise.

"Beats the crap out of me El-Tee."

\_"Castle Team. This is Commander Sarah Palmer aboard the Infinity. Do you copy Spartans?"\_

"What's the problem Commander?" Will asked pausing again.

\_"I got a two part mission for you. And you are the only ones nearby who can complete it."  
><em>

"Shoot. Commander."

\_"There will be a lot of that happening soon. The Storm evidently had scouts, small Zealot class teams that have infiltrated the mountain through the door that we opened on our side. They surprised a Platoon of Marines and now the survivor is headed in your direction. Eliminate it."\_

"We'll take care of it."

\_"Good. There's also the task of securing the rescue of the Rangers that opened the mountain up. They're on the run. It looks like from where their IFF tags last marked them that they'll eventually run into the main party. Scout ahead, find them, and secure anything else of value."\_

"Yes Command-"

\_"Hold on Castle. Update for you. The situation in orbit isn't good. The Admiral and Fleetmaster are pulling their fleets into atmosphere."\_

"What?" Chelsea interjected suddenly.

"How did that happen?"

\_"Seppies showed up with a new warship. Big zappy cannon took out part of a Storm Fleet. An Assault Carrier and several other ships were left completely defenseless. It was all over in 45 seconds. We've also lost three ships in orbit."\_

Chelsea swore. "That fast?"

\_"If things continue to get worse at the rate they are we'll be forced to pull out all together unless the Republic manages to show up. That should let you know how time-pressed we are."\_ Palmer said plowing ahead.

"Copy that Commander."

\_"Get it done Castle. Palmer out."\_

Another metallic thud much closer this time snapped them to reality.

"The Zealot?" Chelsea asked.

"Could be. Castle Four? Stack up in the corners over there."

They both moved out of sight on opposite sides of where the corridor opened up into a much larger room. If whatever was making the noise was to look to either side their cover would be blown. It would serve to distract it though while the other assassinated it.

Twenty seconds had passed when Will started hearing footfalls. Ragged, uneven, stumbling. A curse in Sangheili was heard and Will knew that it was the previously mentioned Zealot.

\_"Sounds like Ripa when he's drunk." \_Chelsea whispered.

\_"Quiet Castle Four." \_Will whispered back but he couldn't help but laugh to himself.

The small grin on his face was replaced with a frown as the footfalls got louder and eventually passed them. A long purple trail oozed out behind the cloaked Zealot. With a flash in the middle of the room he stumbled and fell again making his camouflage falter for a moment. The Zealot cursed and decloaked while it knelt down to examine its injuries. Several bullet wounds had torn through its powerful armor making the blood trails they had seen.

It was too distracted by its injuries to pay attention to Will as he moved from his cover and approached with caution. Even wounded a Zealot was not to be trifled with. It was best to make this quick.

He decided to seize the moment and in when fluid motion turned his silent walk into a two step run. He jumped and unsheathed the knife on his shoulder bringing it up in a plunging motion.

Suddenly the Zealot give a roar as it sensed the change in air pressure and charged towards Will. It slammed into his airborne legs and Will went flying over top. He hit the ground with a crash and rolled to his feet with the momentum suddenly bringing up and throwing the knife with a snap of the wrist. It spun in a hazed blur and only stopped and became visible when the Zealot in a move of sheer skill caught it with it embedded itself in the Zealots armor. It took a hold of it and hurled it towards its sender.

Will rolled out of the way and it skittered past into a corner. He rolled backwards and crouched flipping the FS2000 to full-automatic and squeezing the trigger down while Chelsea surprised the Zealot by opening up with her Shotgun. His own fire caught the Elite in its armored abdomen and caused it to stumble and for the remnants of its shield system to flare up.

"Number Four look out!" he cried.

The Zealot rolled of the way and charged towards Chelsea igniting the energy mounted wrist daggers in twin snap hisses and at the same time letting out a guttural roar. She fired again and what shielding the

Zealot still had failed with a blue pop of light and sound. But it was enough of a break to allow the Zealot to take a massive leap towards her.

Will had dropped his weapon and charged straight after it within a split second of it turning away. It may have been faster but it was slowed by a wound and fatigue. Will launched himself and tackled the Zealot mid jump throwing it off its target. They both slammed into the wall next to Chelsea knocking the air slightly out of Will and dropping his shields slightly.

A massive hand grabbed his collar and flipped him over. A plasma dagger was launched towards his face in the moments after impact and he narrowly avoided being impaled by lashing out with his hand and catching the arm. The floor around was now covered with the Zealots blood which was splattered all over the metal walls and floor making a rather macabre canvas which proved the next moment detrimental to the Zealot as it lost its footing.

"Will get out of the way!" Chelsea shouted as she pumped the action on the Shotgun.

"I'm...trying!" he said grunting with the effort of standing up and wrestling hand to with the Zealot.

"Heresy! Why do you not die!" \_it roared in its native tongue as it struggled with Will who had pinned the Zealot to the wall. The Zealot gave another angry roar and headbutted him knocking him back staggering. It seized him in a bear hug but the shields around Will protected him and the Zealot lost its grip on the slippery surface of Will's shields.

His left hand shot towards his leg for one of the M6s secured with magnetic strips and yanked it off and the same time throwing a right hook to dissuade the Elite from coming closer. It connected with its left mandibles and it gave a painful howl as it reeled back. Will moved in with the Magnum and launched a high two leg kick that caught that floored the Zealot and cracked its combat harness down the middle. He fired but the Zealot rolled again.

"Are you freaking kidding me?" Chelsea yelled annoyed.

She put the Shotgun on her back and move forward taking the imitative and launching a series of punches that Zealot countered with a wheeling kick that sent her flying back. Will fired twice in quick succession and was forced to try and punch with the pistol. It connected with the bottom of its helmet but was knocked back as a punch connected with shoulder. One of the Zealots hands snatched Will's weapon holding arm as he brought it to bear on the head.

He pulled the trigger repeatedly trying to hit the Sangheili but the shots went wild. Both of their hands were on the gun as it flailed around dangerously shooting bullets.

"Chelsea do you have a shot or not?" Will snapped impatiently as he tried to contain the angry Sangheili.

"Move yourself! You're in the line of fire! I can't get a shot!"

"I'm trying over-" \*click\*. His magazine had spent itself.

The Zealot gave a laugh as he realized the threat of the gun had been disabled and tried shoved him away with an armored hoof only to have William be the one to duck underneath as he dropped the empty gun and dove underneath the leg.. It staggered as it lost purchase on the ground and Will jumped on its back forcing it to the ground.

"Fire!" he yelled.

Chelsea grabbed her own M6 and fired as fast she could at the pinned alien.

The explosive full metal jacket rounds did their lethal work and the Zealot seemed to sense his end was near.

"I will rip off your head Demon spawn! A thousand-" \_the Zealot trailed off into gibberish, howled, and spit with flecks of frothy blood as it dislodged Will and was trying to stand again.

"Shut up!" yelled Chelsea who had appeared next to him and launched an upper cut knocking the Zealot down.

It struggled weakly as the two Spartans contained it on the ground.

"What are you doing down here? How many others are down here?" Will yelled at the Sangheili who was now spouting fanatical religious gibberish.

The Zealot stopped and started laughing. Slowly but building up in intensity and coldness.

"Answer me!" said Will drawing his other M9 from his hip and pointing it underneath the neck to secure the Zealot on the ground while he retreated back slightly. Overhead Chelsea trained the barrel of the M90 on the heart of the Elite.

"A bloody fate...awaits your race heretic...for those who seek the mantle of responsibility, there are things on this planet not even the gods know about it."\_

"What does that mean?" Will interrogated looking it square in its dimming eye.

"Leave...demon. There are...things...that lie in wait on this planet."\_

It laughed weakly twice and William felt its pulse stop.

He twisted the dead Elite over to look for anything of value it was carrying. Nothing.

"Freaking figures." Chelsea said with a slight snarl as he got to his feet. "Cocky arrogant hingehead taking its secrets to the grave."

Will got up and brushed as much of the blood as he could off him and scanned the scene. Changing his eyes from the grisly scene he retrieved his knife and sheathed it.

He reloaded his weapons and twisted his head over his shoulder.

"Come on, we've spent enough time here."

"And who exactly is the one sounding like Ripa now?" Chelsea retorted.

"Touche."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Special Operations Sangheili Ripa 'Talam<strong>

\*\*CAS Shadow of Intent\*\*

\*\*9:47:09 Hours\*\*

From inside one of the smaller barracks on board the Shadow of Intent Special Operations Officer Ripa 'Talam paced agitated.

Pacing had been his newest hobby when he had nothing to do in the middle of a combat zone. Especially when the news had come from the Fleetmaster themselves to prepare for potential boarding action from the enemy.

Because of this it was mostly empty with the exception of eight SpecOps Sangheili with dark red armor each with their family crest emblazoned on the right shoulder plate. Ripa had been issued a new set of armor when he had transferred at the request of the Arbiter himself aboard the Shadow of Intent from the Dauntless and been assigned to one of the SpecOp units that was fresh out of training and, to his surprise, give him a promotion. He was their SpecOps Officer, their superior.

He wasn't feeling too great about not telling Will when he had visited him aboard the Dauntless. One new revelation at a time was his rationale. His promotion had caught him off guard. Personally he felt very honored but inadequate. He hadn't seen as much experience as any of his fellow Officers.

He was still getting to know his Lance's names. He had just met them not even twenty minutes ago. He had given a small speech about him and his expectations and a synopsis of why they were here. This planet was their first assignment as a unit and Ripa had never seen a group of SpecOps that were so...innocent. That was the best word he had to describe them. They of course had all seen war but they still held a youthful air about them.

Ripa could tell they were new to this to. They didn't have the same level of maturity and seriousness he had seen with more senior operatives.

"Peace brother. You'll wear a hole in the deck if you keep that up." another Special Operations Sangheili spoke from a corner where he sat upon a chair and looked in interest at a datapad scrolling through in mild boredom.

"Does anyone even have an answer as to why we're descending into



atmosphere?" he asked ignoring the other SpecOps Sangheili. "We've spent enough time on board doing nothing.

An alarm suddenly blared and the lights dimmed to their emergency setting.

"Oh what irony brother." one of them called out.

"Hold your tongue Obla." said Ren 'Xytame. "Something's not right about this situation."

The ship's PA system suddenly blared to life startling the distracted ones. \_"Attention all hands we are being boarded. I repeat we are being boarded. All units are ordered out of corridor seven on level eight. All Combat Teams report to designated assignments immediately. This is not a drill."\_

"Does that answer your question Gharan?" Ripa asked as he scooped up the weapons he had been cleaning off the table and ran out the door flicking the safety of his Plasma Rifle.

Gharan 'Konar, one of the younger members of their unit simply shrugged and then cursed as the ship actually shook hard enough to make him stumble as he ran out the door with the seven other Sangheili towards the Main Hangar, their assigned post.

"Hurry brothers. Time is of the essence." he ordered and they moved faster towards their destination.

\_"Attention all hands! Enemy contacts are attaching on level 3. This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill!" \_the shipwide PA system blared.

They rounded a corner and entered the hangar which was devoid of all vehicles (they had either been launched to assist in the fight outside) or moved elsewhere.

A General was standing in the center giving orders to Lances of Infantry.

"General, what can my warriors do?"

He turned to face him. "Ah. Good, more help. Officer 'Talam, we are intercepting a number of landing craft as we speak and destroying them before they can reach the surface. However since the cowards dare not face us ship to ship they launch boarding parties to divert us from our task. We have them quarantined in the main corridor above us. They look to be trying to break through the barriers we have set up there. You are going to skirt around them and take as many of them out as you can to thin their numbers out.

"Understood."

"Peace brother. You have others at your side. Go, move out!"

Ripa turned away and motioned with his hand.

\_"They're breaking through the door! Warriors, prepare yourselves!" \_came the call on the Battle-Net.

"Haste brothers. Activate camouflage and proceed behind me." Ripa ordered.

The enemy was above them several decks up in the narrower section that connected the prow to the rest of the ship. To get there quickly he moved towards a maintenance causeway and opened the hatch slowly. With it open he lead them in single file into a dark hole with a ladder leading straight up and down. They climbed on and moved cloaked through the darkness. He relied on a map in the corner of his HUD for guidance when they exited the ladder and came into a network of smaller causeways. The security systems, he was glad to see, had been nice enough to mark every hostile for him in red circles. He turned a corner and a large red mass appeared on the other side as the causeway skirted very near the enemy.

He could hear them as well. Metallic clanking could be heard on the other side with a robotic voice occasionally giving indistinguishable orders. There was a lot of them.

"Officer 'Talam." \_the voice of the General in his ears interrupted his movement. \_"There's a combat team on the other side. Strike when the doors open. We'll open them for you so you can ambush unless you would prefer to wait for the enemy to break them. "\_

"We're on it."

Presently they came to another left hand turn that took them past a T-intersection. They crossed the T and Ripa motioned with his hand to a spot where they couldn't be seen by the enemy.

He motioned for his Lance to step back before igniting a small plasma cutter that was built into the side of one his gauntlet's and carved for them a doorway. As it fell another warrior caught it and moved towards the side placing it silently on the opposite wall. The Sangheili all filed out with Ripa leading them to the intersection where they gazed at the enemy.

It was definitely a significant amount of troops that filled the corridor. He glanced them over and made note. Skinny ones in front, rows upon rows of the Super Battle Droids, and, most disturbing of all, several of the "Destroyers".

"Take out the bronze ones first. General, give the order to open the doors." \_

The Sangheili on the other side made no comment but in a second the doors suddenly unlocked with a clunk and hissed open. The droids manning a device that was burning through the door promptly dropped it in panic and ran backwards.

"Grenades!" roared Gharan from next to him.

Three of the Sangheili tossed the glowing plasma grenades at the Destroyer droids. The droids did the only sensible thing they could and deployed their shields. Unfortunately for them the grenades ignited in a storm of white hot plasma that completely filled their shield bubble before exploding outwards and engulfing others.

He heard a distant roar and recognized the cries of an angry Hunter pair from beyond them.

He motioned his Lance (still cloaked) to take cover behind the walls as moments later radioactive green beams tore through their ranks atomizing those that were directly caught.

"For the Honor of Sangheilios!" roared Ripa as he uncloaked and started spewing plasma bolts from his twin rifles. He was met with a resounding roar as carbines, needlers, and plasma rifles came to life and added to the chaos surrounding the droids.

The Destroyers gone he focused on taking down the Super Battle Droids who were not amused at the turn of events. Conflicted they turned towards both sides and pushed forward firing as they went. Their armor had the most annoying effect of bouncing the occasional bolt or radioactive pellet off armor.

"Aim for the legs, not the body!" he called out as they turned towards them.

He ducked past the wall as a large concentration of ruby bolts were sent at him. He crouched and fired one of his rifles leaning out of cover when he had a shot.

He had a good view of his lance which was doing extraordinarily well. Fire was shifted to priority targets, soldiers were covered when they had to reload, they communicated well too shouting encouragement and orders to each other. He liked this group although he still needed to learn names. When this was all over he would start over fresh.

The droids still pressed on them and were getting too close for liking.

"Fall back to cover!" he ordered and tossed a grenade to eliminate some of the greater threats to them.

When it detonated he sprinted out of his cover to the opposite side of the T and leaned out firing at the droids ushering the other Elites to move. They did so providing cover fire as they sprinted back for more defensible positions in the hallways. He left his cover and charged back.

"How many of these abominations are there?" asked N'thro 'Zamame.

"Enough to give us and our families much honor!" Ripa called out trying to stir up the hearts of his Lance.

His words served their desired effect and they fought back with a savage glee as they droids came around the corner. The droids stood no chance. Even en masse they could only go three maybe four at a time around the corner, down the hallway, and try and turn another corner to touch them. They fell before they could get off a shot.

Too easy.

He heard a roar and a whoosh from behind the droids and the Hunter pair he had heard earlier tore into the center of the formation followed by a Major and a trio of grunts who were more than happy to put an end to any machine still standing. With a mundane clunk the

last battle droid fell to the deck with an energy sword gutting it.

Ripa and the others cheered as it did so and while the Lance moved to inspect this damage

"General, the hostiles are gone."

\_"Excellent work. However there is more for us to do. The Separatists are making it through our blockade and landing troops on the planet. Within a matter of hours it shall be theirs unless we can prevent that on the ground. Fleetmaster 'Vadum has ordered us on the ground. Report to the hangar again and you'll ride down in drop pods." \_

The connection closed and after explaining the situation the lance left as quickly as they had arrived.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC Infinity (INF-101)<br>\*\*

\*\*10:20 hours\*\*

"Captain Lasky?"

"What Roland?" asked the Captain as he strode over to his hologram.

"The Fleetmaster is on the line for you."

"Put him up." he said striding over to the Captains chair and sat down looking at a screen.

The Fleetmaster fizzled into connection.

"Fleetmaster Vadum', what can I do for you?"asked Captain Lasky.

"Captain, as you can probably tell the situation in orbit is deteriorating slightly. I am sending the majority of my forces ground side. It would be better to give my warriors a fighting chance on the ground. I also have two special operations units I can give to help with the search for your lost men."

"Good to hear it Fleetmaster." Lasky said slightly surprised. "Send your teams to these coordinates." Lasky replied entering said coordinates into a datapad.

"Understood captain. You will have my warriors. We will prevent as many of them as possible from landing but we can only do so much. The Admiral has a much harder job holding back the fleet and we can't spread ourselves too thin. We'll be in contact."

"Understood. Good luck Fleetmaster."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Interior of Forerunner Mountain<strong>

\*\*The "Labyrinth"\*\*

It had felt like they had been walking for hours in the twisting winding tunnels. After they had killed the Zealot they had found nothing else to deal with. In fact nobody had found anything. He had heard some chatter from Fireteam Shadow about their passage joining up with the others. For William, the presence of nothing but the silent corridors was slightly unnerving. No Covenant, UNSC, or Prometheans. It was starting to drive William mad.

\_"Commander Palmer to Castle team. Sitrep, over." \_She said interrupting their slow pace

"We've seen nothing, commander. This place is empty." Will replied slightly irritated.

\_"Your attitude is noted. I have some good news for you Spartan. The Hingeheads have sent two SpecOps teams to help you. You know the Officer of one of them. Ripa 'Talam? Correct?"\_

"Yes Commander." he paused. "Wait, say the name again?"

\_"Good I guess you do know him. He's on his way he landed minutes ago with a squad. Thought you would appreciate the assistance. I still need you to recover the Ranger's. Last heard they still had Storm coming after them. Keep me posted out. Palmer out.'"\_

"Ripa's coming down here? Seems kinda odd, doesn't it?" Chelsea asked.

"It must be bad in orbit." Will replied as they came to another junction. "We'll wait here for him."

They waited a good ten minutes before they saw the familiar outlines of Special Operation Eiltes.

"Good to see you again, brother." One of them said revealing himself to be Ripa.

"Likewise Ripa. How many are with you?"

"There are three more warriors guarding our exit as well as the two with me so six in total."

"You know nobody told me you were promoted."

"You were long on the ground when I was called for and promoted."

"Alright." he shrugged. "I guess congratulations are in order. We have a job to do here though, let's get it done." Will said, waving the UNSC/Sangheili team forwards.

The larger group were able to make much more progress. Ripa occasionally ordered the rear guard to move up to cover them but for the most part they walked in a slightly less dead silence.

They were pleasantly surprised when their passage way suddenly curved to the right and opened back up into the main tunnel which seemed a bit lighter than when they had entered it.

He radioed into Palmer to report this discovery and they were ordered to move forward. To his surprise she had told him that they were ahead of the others and to move forward with all haste. Will noticed the main passage of the cave was starting to slope down gradually and thought he could see the end of the tunnel.

"I think we're close." Chelsea said as they started jogging.

"I see light ahead." said one of Ripa's Elites.

Will switched off the low-light filter on his helmet and was met with a blue glow coming from ahead. He looked up and saw the roof of the tunnel sloping upwards more and more drastically. Suddenly from along both sides blue and above lights flashed to life along the wall in regular intervals.

Will suddenly paused and ordered the group to hold up as his helmet registered a message of some sort trying to display itself but kept getting lost in a sea of numbers. After a moment it displayed itself.

\_\_"We've awaited you for a long time. Unseal the hushed caskets. Take us home to the light."\_\_

"What the?"

He looked over to see Chelsea obviously confused.

"What is it?" anxiously asked one of the Elites holding his weapon ready looking about.

"Its...a message of some sort." said William. He repeated it to elicit the same confusion he had.

"Something has noticed our presence at least. It could be survivors." Ripa grunted.

They quickly moved on after no one said anything more.

He moved onwards and suddenly the floor suddenly became covered with a thin layer of snow until they were running on top of a hardened crust which cracked underneath their feet.

"This mountain has more surprises than I thought." Ripa commented.  
"Where did this come from? The mountain has no hole in the top."

"Perhaps the Forerunners decided to make it snow inside the mountain?" someone suggested.

"Hey! Look ahead!" Will called out. Ahead of them they could see the ground dropping down at a more dramatic angle. He suddenly realized what he thought was the end of the tunnel was in fact the other side of the mountain.

"Come on!" Will urged. The group ran faster and faster until they stopped at the edge of where the tunnel opened up. And there they all stopped and stared.

"Oh...my-" Chelsea breathed out.

"By the Forerunners!" exclaimed Ripa.

"Commander Palmer?" Will asked hailing the Spartan Commander aboard Infinity.

\_"Good news?"\_

"Commander, we've found them."

Will mentally saw her blinking surprise.

\_"Please confirm Castle One?"\_ Palmer asked.

He looked below at the scene facing him.

Ahead of him the ground sloped into a large circular basin that encompassed the perimeter of the mountain as far as he could see. Lights illuminated the whole thing helped by the presence of several large holes in the top that let in natural light. Waterfalls cascaded down creating two small lakes and rivers that flowed to the outside world. And in the center of the mountain, with barely enough room to fit, lay the dormant shape with letters neatly stenciled in fading white paint.

SPIRIT OF FIRE

CFV-88

And next to it resting a moderate distance away lay a Marathon class cruiser, the UNSC Svalbard.

"Transmitting visuals now." he said clicking one of the buttons on the Field Commander-Intelligence Module on the side of his head that started transmitting a live image of what he looked at.

He heard her intake of breath as she saw the images.

\_"Tom, get over here!"\_ he heard her call out.

\_"Castle One?"\_ another voice interrupted after a moment longer. \_"Do you read me? This is Captain Lasky" \_

"Read you loud and clear Captain." Will replied with a growing smile on his face as they looked around. "Do you like the view?"

\_"Beautiful."\_ he said choking slightly. \_"And\_ its all thanks to your group. I'll put you in touch with Doctor Halsey as soon as her debrief is over. Your new orders are to find the Ranger's and secure the area. Good work soldiers, you have the thanks of humanity. Lasky out." \_

He must have forgotten to terminate the link because he heard him call out to his crew.

\_"Attention all hands, we've found them!"\_ a muffled cheering was heard as well as the Captain celebrated with the jubilant crew aboard Infinity.

Will closed the connection himself and stopped recording the area with the FC-I module.

"Officer 'Talam? Can you secure the entrance? We're going to find the Rangers."

"With honor." he bowed and immediately the lance cloaked and went to work securing the area.

"Come on!" he said motioning to Chelsea. He looked over to their right and saw a railed ramp leading up to what looked like an open structure with a pinnacle at the top that overlooked the massive room. A long walkway that circled the entire chamber. They hurried up it and paused when they heard what sounded like human voices.

"The walkway! There's a tunnel that connects to it!" Chelsea said pointing with her shotgun free hand. The two of them hurried towards it. But before they could they so thirty men all staggered out of the tunnel and onto the walkway with chests heaving.

"Think it's the Rangers?" Chelsea asked.

"I don't know." he said. He suddenly moved closer towards them. "Javelin!" he called out staying out of sight as he approached weapons raised. Javelin was a code word used to identify friendly forces. If the group didn't give the proper code word they would be shot on sight.

"Sparrow!" the group called out in nervous, exhausted voices looking around for the speaker.

He lowered his weapon as he heard the correct word and emerged. "At ease. Spartan at your service. Are you from the 75th Rangers?"

There was a weary chorus of yes and Will breathed a sigh of relief. He noticed some of them were wounded. One of them was being carried upon stretcher missing an entire leg.

"We have friendly forces en route to our position. Move the wounded first. I need one or two squads guarding this door though. I presume there are Storm following you?

The group looked around hesitantly.

"Yes sir. We had an armored column following us. We got rid of them but we're out of heavy weapons. We just followed the passages until we go here...so...I would assume there are people following." said one of the Rangers. He looked at the speaker and almost jolted when he realized it was his brother Eric standing there.

"Alright. I'll take care of the door. Head down the ramp and over there and take a rest. Thank you for opening the door."

The Ranger's began to disperse and William contacted Palmer to inform her that the Rangers had been located.

"Watch the door. I'm sealing it up." Will said crouching down and removing a small canister from a small pouch.

He cracked it open and placed the first item, an extremely volatile



incendiary device in the hallway where it glowed a pale green in the dark. Then he placed the second one, a small cylinder in the door frame and popped the safety off. Instantly it began to explode outwards and up creating a thick instacrete slab that sealed the corridor into silence within seconds. All one had to do now was step on the device and it would torch the entire corridor with a wall of flame.

"So what now?" asked Chelsea as they finished creating their deathtrap.

"We rescue everyone, go home, and spend our days on the beaches of Costa Rica."

"Mmm." Chelsea said imagining what that would entail. "I could use a little relaxation."

They heard a sudden muffled cry and then a much larger muffled explosion as the incendiary device detonated behind the concrete wall. In spite of themselves they laughed and began walking back.

\* \* \*

><p><em>And there you have it! The mountain is opened and everything is falling nicely into place with the confirmed discovery of the Spirit of Fire and the Svalbard. However the Confederacy still has the Malevolence in orbit. How will this play out in future chapters? And what about the Republic? They still have to show their faces! The action may have quieted down but it is sure to pick up again. Please leave a review! Questions? Suggestions? Ideas? Give 'em to me. Your input is always welcome.<br>\_

\_Merry Christmas to all of those celebrating it today! \_

\_Many thanks to my wonderful beta-readers \*\*gwb99, Lord Razer,\*\* and\*\* ARCCaptainFordo \*\*for their work and ideas. And additionally my thanks to \*\*Mandalore the freedom \*\*for suggestions and ideas.

—

\_Have a wonderful day!\_

\_\*\*theotherpianist\*\*\_

## 15. Chapter 15

\_Hello world! \*\*theotherpianist \*\*is finally back with another long awaited update. If you thought the wait times before were bad with the last two chapters you should have seen my life during the last four weeks. Holy. Cow. \_\_I'm glad that everything has settled down. My development team and I were set back by plot holes and inconsistencies we had to fill before we could proceed.

><em>

\_This chapter will be another longer one. This was originally supposed to be a 8,000 word chapter but I spilled over my word count by\*\* a lot. \*\* \_

\_To spare you from reading something entirely too too long (11,000

words admittedly is pushing it big time) I have abridged it into something shorter. I don't think you would have the patience to read almost 20,000 words. I wouldn't.

><em>

\_As I don't have the time to do reviews right now this chapter will be missing its review section. \_

\_Please enjoy the presentation. \_

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 15:<p>

\*\*Vos Gessel Street,\*\*

\*\*Uscru Entertainment District,\*\*

\*\*Coruscant:\*\*

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" the cloaked figure hissed vehemently.

"Shut up and mingle more will ya Zek?"

The AWOL Skirmisher grunted a reply and only could follow behind his new companion as they made their way down a flashy, garish street covered with advertisements and holograms. He give a sharp cry and stifled it as his "armor" jolted him.

"Hey, what's with you?" he asked turning his head.

"It's nothing."

Still not convinced he shook his head after a moment.

"Relax, I'm not about to go abandon you. I've got a contact I need to meet up with. He knows a few people who could help you get off world. The place I have in mind, you could even recruit a couple pirates if you wanted. But we're here for a different purpose."

"And remind me what that is again."

"Spice." He said with a sour face.

"Narcotics?"

"Whatever you prefer to look at them as. I find them nasty myself but most of the galaxy is not of that opinion. Potent, powerful, that stuff can kill with just one use. It turns a good profit though at any rate. Couple friends of mine were runnin' from the law a week back and I let them hide out in my place. They promised a payment as compensation. We're going to see where they left it."

"You sound more like a smuggler than a Bounty Hunter." Zek noted.

Dax gave a good laugh at that.

"Yeah. Given how things have been recently that's a fair comment to

make. Didn't always use to be that way. Five years ago, I guess I was 27, I was doing just fine. I had employers and jobs all over Hutt controlled space in the Outer Rim. It was a decent life. Show up on time with money that you needed, keep the killing to a descreet minimum, and you could live without any difficult. \*\*\*\*, it was extremely profitable."

"So what happened?"

He sighed and gave Zek a rueful expression as they stopped at a corner.

"I took a bad job and it got me mixed up with internal power struggles between my main employer, a man named Cyrus and his brother Castor, and Jabba the Hutt's crime syndicate. They used to be head of a big swoop gang. Cyrus and Castor had a falling out over debt to a Hutt named Jabba. I was involved with a big score and a negotiation between them and Jabba. Castor and Cyrus essentially fought a three way war over narcotics, contraband, slaves, whatever they thought was theirs. In the end though Jabba manipulated things so that they were both dead and a bounty placed on anyone who had associated with them."

"So you went into hiding."

"I did. Took the money I had and used it all to wipe out any trace of myself in the Outer Rim and bring myself here to start fresh. Originally wanted to go to Mandalore but everything went bad there."

"Because...?"

"Group called Deathwatch." his nose wrinkled at the word and he spat. "Guess I should give you a history on my planet Mandalore if I'm going to tell you that story. But later, we can't be late."

"Fine." Zek said dismissively but with his curiosity still peeked.

They walked until they came to a rather shady, aged building with all the trappings, bright lights, and holograms of a night club.

"This is the Outlander Club. Of all the places to go find a good place to gamble, this is it. However there are a whole lot more than gamblers in this place. Stick close and keep your weapons hidden." he finished with a warning.

They left the greasy, swirling air of outside and stepped into the inconspicuous building.

Dax waded into the mass of aliens with an ease that had to have come from living on this massive city. Zek stood for a moment taking everything in.

A large central circular room served as the nexus of the entire place. A bar sat in the center of the room serving a large crowd of citizenry. Still more were sitting at tables around the edge looking at wide variety of screens that showcased what looked to be sporting events. Along the edge of the circle were several alcoves set into the wall which gave the patrons eating some privacy. He gave them no

attention even as one raucous group exploded into cheers and exchanged money over in a corner. A band was playing background music in the corner that added to the riotous atmosphere.

He rejoined Dax in a moment and the two slid into one of the empty booths. In a moment a server droid rolled up to them.

"What can I get you today?"

Dax turned to the droid and thought for a moment.

"Two Correlian on the Rocks." he said after a moment. "And tell the manager that his acquaintance is here." he added as an after-thought.

Their drinks appeared with a server who was rough and grizzled moments later.

"Evening Jacen."

One of the waiters slid in on the opposite side of Dax and Zek.

"Who's your friend?" he asked suspiciously eying the cloaked figure.

"Zek here is going AWOL from the Allied Species. He'd much rather prefer going back to piracy which is his trade."

"A Pirate huh?"

"What's it to you?" Zek asked coldly.

"Hey easy!" Jace said putting his hands up. So piracy eh?" he said changing tacts.

"We were going to collect our spice payment Jacen." Dax stated bluntly.

"Ah. I thought that was why you'd be here. By the way thanks again for saving my-"

"Where is it?" Dax asked going straight to the point, slightly frustrated.

"The Galaxies Opera House. It's concealed in the column next to the bust of Eroli Bystistia. If you access the maintenance hatch on the next floor above you can sneak inside it and grab it. The column is hollowed out and used as storage. Nobody's touched it in ages though. Especially if its a long performance like tonight. They're doing the premier of Sleeping Kotha." He cast a glance over his shoulder at a bartender who seemed to be searching for someone.

"Got to report back. Enjoy your drinks." he disappeared without another word leaving two glasses with a blue sparkling liquid swirling around.

"Finish 'em quickly and let's go." The Mandalorian said when he was gone. Show's normally start in about a half hour. We can hit the Opera House, grab the loot, and get out of here before anyone's the

wiser."

"How much are we looking at getting paid?"

"A lot. He had a massive shipment of spice that needed hiding."

"Enough to try and get us to our next step?"

Dax laughed. "If we can figure out our next step."

He raised his glass.

"To success and your future."

The glasses clinked and they took a big gulp each.

Zek allowed himself a grin.

"Let's go."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC Dauntless<strong>

\*\*Orbit of Planet Cryptum, Wild Space Regions\*\*

"That's another Destroyer gone! Admiral they're going to break right through us!"

For what seemed the umpteenth this day the Admiral felt suddenly sickened. The feeling was gone after a moment though. At this point in his career he was desensitized to the loss of men. He had lost too many men in the last war he had fought. But such things had to be dealt with in this line of work. That was why the Admiral sent out a quiet prayer for the soul's of those lost, gritted his teeth, and tried to adapt to this new development.

"See if you can't shift our forces around! Weapons, re-prioritize targets based on the amount of weaponry they're throwing at us."

"Aye Admiral!"

"Yorktown and Saratoga are reporting loss of shields!"

"Tell them to get out of harm's way. They can't help any more at this point." he ordered.

"Fighter casualties nearing thirty percent!"

"Send them away, I don't need more dead men! Keep our fighters to our ships now, that's the only place they'll do good."

"Sangheili just lost two of their Battlecruisers with all hands evacuating. We got reports of the Separatist landing craft deploying troops!"

"Regal Attire is venting atmosphere on multiple decks! \*\*\*\*! The Malevolence is making a run at us!"

He stopped his next series of orders and felt himself pale as the ship made a run at them from its position behind their advance guard. While his fleet had been doing better than expected against a much larger force he was learning all too well the doctrine on which the superpowers in this galaxy operated ships.

Simply put that doctrine was, create as many vessels as possible, usually of a medium tonnage that made them the same size as a Marathon class cruiser, and put as many turbolaser emplacements as possible on a ship without leaving it devoid of power for shields and hyperdrive.

It didn't matter how accurate (which for the most part they weren't) they were if one were to mount dozens, hundreds, on any ship. With that much firepower someone was bound to hit something. The next step would be to inevitably grind the two fleets together without care for lives of crew. The CIS of course could do this. They had the manpower (or in this case droid power) to do so.

Tactically speaking, the UNSC and, to some extent, the Sangheili, were inferior in a "up close and personal" fight. Missiles could only do so much by themselves and secondary weapons like the Onager emplacements on the Dauntless or Infinity were limited. They were effective yes, brutally so as evidenced by the Dauntless and its action on Rhen Var, but in prolonged contact?

He glanced over to the Sangheili fleet as a Sangheili Corvette suddenly went supernova and mentally cursed the Separatists. The Swords of Sangheilios, at least were better matched to face off against the Separatist's. Their ships possessed weapons with a limited similarity to the enemy's. If he had more nuclear armaments than what he came to fight with he might have been able to do more damage and make the Confederacy stop and think. But all of his missiles were expended at this point with the exception of four Shiva class nukes stationed on the Dauntless and a single Nova bomb on the Infinity. He was saving those for use on that \*\*\*\*\* ship if worse came to worst.

As much as he hated to admit it the Confederacy had the edge in a prolonged fight. The Navy and its tried and true hit-and-run tactics simply couldn't match the Confederacy for a long time. If the Confederacy, especially the General commanding it, had no qualms about using as many resources as possible to achieve their goal, than Tchkova was dead already. It was a matter of time at this point. He knew in his heart that if reinforcements didn't show soon he would take the blame for their defeat on this planet.

He watched mutely for a moment as the Malevolence destroyed another Storm ship that had unwisely tried to come to fight on its own terms. That \_behemoth \_was almost as large as an Assault Carrier or the Infinity.

It suddenly turned so that its side was facing the Dauntless.

"What is it-"

Tchkova stopped for a second and choked on his own thoughts as he saw a faint purple glimmer appear around the area of the ion cannon and watched as the Confederacy moved their own fleet backwards.

"Helm! I wanted everyone in atmosphere yesterday!"

"Sir?" asked Helm.

"Now!" Tchkova shouted losing any trace of being calm.

The Dauntless lurched to the side and began turning away.

"Sarah! Tell all ships to prepare courses of retreat! If that ship gains any more ground we are all dead. Notify our ground forces and prepare preparatory evacuation."

"Admiral with our current state succesful evacuation is unlikely!"

The Dauntless had now turned tail and was fleeing for the safety of the planet's atmosphere with an almost reckless abandon. The other ships upon seeing the Dauntless flee away did likewise at once. The Sangheili were the fastest to retreat into atmosphere because they were fighting literally above it trying to stem an immense wave of landing craft.

"Energy spike building on the Malevolence's starboard!" Weapons shouted.

"How soon until they fire?" he asked

"Fleet is almost within atmosphere!" someone else reported simultaneously.

"I don't know when they'll-"

An alarm suddenly blared to life adding to the chaos of the Bridge drowning out the Weapons Officer.

"Contact! Energy pulse from Malevolence! ETA 15 seconds!"

He looked up as the cannon suddenly surged and the lethal wave of energy rushed upon them. Ten seconds, five seconds, he was gripping the arms of his chair so hard his hands shook.

"All crew brace for impact!" he yelled as it filled the entire expanse of the viewscreen.

He gritted his teeth and watched as the purple disc of churning energy raced down through the clouds towards the fleet. He forced his eyes open as it passed over the ship and didn't register the fact for a moment that the ship was humming normally. Nothing sparked, powered down, although the lights surged on the deck for a moment.

He suddenly could breathe again as he realized that the atmosphere of the planet had dissipated the charge enough as to render it harmless. Below them it shuddered and dissipated violently into the air and ground below.

"No damage reported by the fleet." someone breathed out after a moment.

The Bridge exploded into cheering as they came to grips with their

survival.

"Malevolence is settling overhead of us!" cried out the Helm Officer and instantly the aura of relief was dispelled.

Dean Tchkova wiped his brow of any sweat and adjusted his cap.

"Helm, take evasive maneuvers and split up the fleet! Don't let its guns draw a bead on us!"

"Aye sir-uhhh...Admiral? Yorktown and Saratoga are in flanking positions on the Malevolence! Orders?" Helm asked.

He paused for a moment. "I want those two as distractions. Tell them not to get too close but I want them to distract General Grievous. If we get divert his attention we have a shot at him. Let's smoke the \*\*\*\*\*!"

The Bridge chorused with a shout of affirmation and the Dauntless began to weave back and forth unevenly as the Malevolence slowly descended through the thick clouds between them to finish off what they still thought would be a helpless fleet.

They would be proven wrong in a moment.

"Admiral, Infinity is moving to support us! Captain Lasky hailing us!"

"Open a channel. Then we'll show the Confederate \*\*\*\*\* why nobody should mess with the Navy!"

"Oorah!"

"Admiral Tchkova? Captain Lasky here. We thought you could use a little assistance against that ship." \_said a video-scan of the Captain.

"Music to my ears Captain. It's time we turn this fleet around." he turned to his Principle Weapons Officer.

"Pee-woah?"

"Yes sir?"

"Prepare missile solutions for the fleet."

"For what missiles sir?"

He took a seat and strapped himself in and looked the Officer in the eye with a steely glint.

"All of them."

If the PWO had any regrets he squashed them with an eager "Yes sir!"

"Ready to fire on your command Admiral!" said Sarah who had been following their dialogue.

He watched as the Malevolence made itself visible through the cloud



layer and started opening up with Turbolaser batteries. They were surprised by a lack of powerless ships that were taking every action it could to avoid being made a helpless target. Confused, it stopped its descent to try and shift to a better angle to deal with the now spread out fleet. The Malevolence suddenly became even more apprehensive as the massive hulk of the Infinity suddenly rose from the lower depths of the sky to join the fleet in combat and it started to back away trying to regain the advantage of orbit around the planet.

The Dauntless' Frigate escorts Yorktown and Saratoga were flying around the ship at random firing deck guns and the occasional missile to boot. They may have been small but the speed at which they moved and their continued presence was distracting the Confederacy. The Malevolence actually began turning its prow to try and track the two Frigates with all its guns.

It shuddered for a moment as the Infinity's secondary weapon emplacements opened fire as it arrived on scene and the Malevolence rocked slightly under a solid smack on the nose...or rather stern. Tchkova was awarded regardless with the sight of its shields flickering noticeably.

"Their shields are low Admiral." Sarah reported.

"Now!" he yelled. "All ships target that \*\*\*\*\* and fire!"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>CSS Subjugator Class Cruiser Malevolence  
<strong>

**\*\*General Grievous\*\***

"Uhh. General?"

"What is it?" the Cyborg General growled as he came up to the droid that had summoned him.

"Scans show our ion cannon hit them but the ships are still functional!"

"What?" the General asked outraged and somewhat confused.

The clouds in front of the Bridge cleared as the Malevolence broke the bottom of the ceiling.

"What? Impossible!" he howled again as he saw, not lifeless, falling, and disabled ships, but an organized (albeit haphazardly) fleet rushing away in all directions trying to make use of their miraculous invulnerability.

"Scans show our ion cannon was dispersed by the local atmosphere.

"What do we do!" one of the pilot's said as they pointed at the fleet spread below.

"Rarrgh!" Grievous growled and with a savage swipe decapitated it with a swipe of a clawed hand.

"Raise this ship and open fire! All turbolasers at maximum! Kill them!"

"Uhh sir?" said another one of his pathetic crew.

"What!" he roared again.

"A new ship is joining them! And its big!"

He looked around and spotted the vessel in question, as large as his own and probably just as deadly. He decided that it would be best to cut his losses and fall back to where he had help from the rest of his fleet.

The ship rocked suddenly and despite his magnetized talons, Grievous flailed for balance.

"Where is that coming from?" he asked angrily.

"That was the big one! They're trying to prevent us from leaving! Two smaller ones are trying to cut us off!"

He paused for a moment.

"Burn them and retreat." He said coldly.

From all around turbolasers switched their targets to the Frigates Yorktown and Saratoga who were weaving unevenly around the ship trying to prevent the Malevolence from leaving.

\_Idiots.\_

As impossible as it seemed, to his surprise and annoyance the ships were managing to avoid most of the enemy fire with only the satisfaction of a few glancing hits.

"Keep firing! Blast them!"

The Frigates kept the Malevolence in a slow spinning turn as it tried to kill the two flies circling it.

"Why can't we hit them?" the Cyborg said dangerously smooth turning to one of the few live crew members on their ship.

The Neimoidian in question froze and paled terribly as they looked up at the towering figure of the General. All it would take would be one fist to his...

"Boy, I sure love how they haven't fired at us!" one of the Pilots called out distracting Grievous for a second.

Grievous suddenly froze with his eyes narrowing suddenly.

Why hadn't they been firing at them?

"Turn us around!" he ordered.

A shrill alarm suddenly filled the Bridge as it began burning a course to leave atmosphere.

"General! Enemy fleet is firing missiles!" the Neimodian beneath him shrieked suddenly and pointed in terror.

He turned away from the Neimodian and saw a thick cloud of what looked like every missile being launched from every ship below.

"I said get us out of here!" he snarled turning away. "Shields at maximum and all batteries target those missiles!"

"But...there's too many!" another droid interrupted him.

With a squawk from the offending Battle Droid Grievous gripped its head and pulled it from its seat ripping circuits and decapitating another one of his crew.

"I said FIRE!"

From all over the ship turbolasers just picked points in the cloud and fired. He watched as chunks of the deadly cloud were vaporized.

"Brace yourselves!" the Neimodian called out from the back as the missiles moved out of range.

With an enormous flash of white the General was suddenly blinded for a moment as the powerful shields of the Subjugator class cruiser was hit by an enormous volley of missiles that shook and rocked the ship back and forth as every missile launched dispatched its lethal payload to the ship. While a fraction were vaporized by guns it was not enough to stop the thunder that shook everything on board.

The General was knocked off balance and fell to his knees as the rocking became even more and more violent. Wires were torn loose, power surged, and an acrid smoke filled the air as the explosions of red, orange, white, and yellow colored themselves across the massive ship.

And then suddenly it was over and the Bridge fell silent again.

"Status report!" he coughed.

"Our shields are at dangerous levels! We've lost multiple gun emplacements on our bow and plasma rotors are damaged! We've lost our main hyperdrive too! This ship can't withstand more punishment if they pull a stunt like that again General! We need to retreat!" another Neimoidian spoke panicked.

His eyes glinted with a steely rage as watched the fleet below wait for his next move. He was fully confident that was all if not most of their supply of missiles.

"Prepare to atta-"

"Wait! Incoming contacts from hyperspace!" he gasped and grew a sickly gray. "It's the Republic! And they brought a Mandator!"

Grievous really wanted to kill everything on that bridge at that

point in time. But such things could come later. If the Republic was indeed here then he stood no more chance given the current state of affairs. It was time for him to do what he did best. The presence of a Mandator class ship meant the battle was over...for now.

"Issue a general retreat for the entire force. Wait, strike that. Leave the ground troops. Tell them to burn anything in their way."

"Roger roger."

If he could have smiled he would have, after all, he had close to 120,000 units on the ground right now that had broken through the Sangheili blockade. Lord Sidious would be disappointed that he hadn't captured a planet, but he would bleed their foes on the ground. He had already taken out the Storm fleet and sent it running back to wherever. Count Dooku would at least be pleased with that. The arrival of a Mandator also had implications. Those were deployed to key planets only in defensive roles. Somewhere a sector was missing a huge chunk of its defense. It was time that he exploit it. And when the time was right they would strike back. Let them have their victory for the moment.

And if the Allied Species somehow managed to win on the ground? They would only meet their demise by his hand soon. They would soon have a nasty surprise though. He had authorized when he had arrived the deployment of an experimental communications disruptor. They were due to start blocking their communications any second now. They would have no warning. He also had recovery droids currently scavenging and transmitting from the destroyed Storm ships for any useful data. Sidious and Dooku would be most pleased when they got back the results.

The Allied Species would feel his wrath soon.

\_Very\_, \_very\_ \_soon\_.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Anakin Skywalker<strong>

\*\*Uncharted Planet?, \*\*\*Wild Space Regions\*\*

\*\*RSS Resolute\*\*

Generals? We've arrived in system." one of the Officers announced to the bridge as the ships transitioned from lightspeed.

"Status Admiral?" Anakin asked as he took in observations of the space surrounding the planet.

"We've arrived in system General. However...you are aware that we are not in a charted system?" Admiral Yularen asked with some hesitancy.

"Quite aware." Anakin said distracted as he focused his eyes on the planet, a green orb iced with bands of clouds. Several inland seas broke up the green into splotches of blue.

"This planet lies along an old spice route. Why would it just

disappear from our archives?" his Padawan added as an afterthought.

"I don't know Snips. Obi-Wan had a similar thing happen to him. He was sent to investigate the location of Kamino before the war even began. As luck would have it, Kamino was not available in the archives either. And when he got there? There was a Clone army over 200,000 strong with a million more ready for deployment."

"I don't think we're likely to find Clones though." snorted Captain Rex from beside him.

"It would appear that the Confederacy has got its hands bloody, look at that debris field over there." he said pointing it out on a hologram of the planet. "Separatist fleet is maintaining orbit over this sector of the planet and looks to be fighting the extremists that attacked Coruscant."

"But where are our Allies?" asked Captain Rex.

"It is possible the UNSC were driven from here given that some of their ships are among the wreckage." Admiral Yularen noted with interest. "But that doesn't explain where the rest were."

"Maybe they could tell us." suggested Ahsoka pointing in the distance. Coming into closer view was a group of 40 or so Confederate vessels.

"I don't think they'd give us an answer." Rex replied.

"Shouldn't Obi-Wan and Master Plo be here soon?" Ahsoka asked.

"Relax Snips. They'll be here any moment."

A warning from a Trooper behind him and twin flashes of light to the right and left gave way to two small mixed groups of Venator and Acclamator Class warships.

"See? What did I tell you." he said with his usual casualness.

"That would be Generals Kenobi and Koon." His padawan noted.

"But where's General Windu?" asked Admiral Yularen interrupting. "Of all the Jedi I've ever met, \_he \_seems to be the one that always goes by the book."

"He said something about needing to pick up something big." Ahsoka replied. "What exactly it was is beyond me."

"More reinforcements!" another Clone called out.

An enormous dagger like ship bristling with weaponry suddenly exploded into existence right in front of them.

"Woah!" his Padawan cried out in surprise.

"Oh. Guess that's where Master Windu is." said Anakin with a grin.

"What's that?" his Padawan questioned straining to get a better look at the new ship. The eight kilometer vessel settled into a slow burn towards the planet and the other ships moved to surround it.

"A \_Mandator\_?" spluttered Admiral Yularen who was trying to regain his composure from the sudden arrival of Master Windu. "They send a Mandator to this rock? Who in the nine Corellian-"

"Sirs, we are being hailed." Comms interrupted them.

"Put it up." replied Anakin as they all turned to face the Resolute's holoprojector.

Within a moment the blue holoscan of Mace Windu filled the empty space shortly followed by Obi-Wan.

"Greetings Master Windu." Anakin spoke first. "Where's Master Plo?"

\_"Greetings."\_ Master Windu replied in his trademark cool demeanor. \_"Master Koon will join me in a minute aboard the Pride of the Core. His expertise is in Naval Combat, something that will certainly be done here in a moment should the Separatists attempt to revenge themselves here."\_

"Forgive me General," Yularen interrupted for a moment. "Who authorized the sending of a Mandator II to here? Those are restricted to key defense zones only!"

\_"That would be the Chancellor." \_said a new figure stepping into the picture. \_"If you feel so unsure about this display of force to the Confederacy, why don't you tell the Chancellor himself?"\_

"I don't think that's necessary Admiral Tarkin." Yularen said slightly choked.

"He's got a valid point though." Anakin said looking to defend the man. "Mandator class vessels are only to be deployed in key places. And here we already have all this," he gestured to the other ships, "All this for one Planet?" he asked mildly amused.

Obi-Wan sighed and buried his face in a hand as Mace Windu stared at him for a moment with an unreadable face.

"That planet how ever the odds may fall, is of great importance to the Chancellor\_ as well\_ as the Allied Species." said Admiral Tarkin.

"Admiral, excuse me, but I'm still trying to understand why he wants this planet." said Ahsoka slightly confused.

\_"According to the Allied Species they want this planet so they can search for have lost crew and materials on this planet. The second part is what pertains to us General. There are also...unconfirmed reports of Forerunner artifacts on the planet."\_

"You're talking about the extinct race they say used to inhabit the other galaxy?" she asked.

\_"That would be correct."\_ Plo Koon said as he emerged into

view.

\_"Which is why the Chancellor wants it."\_ Kenobi following up.

"He wants artifacts?" Rex asked blankly trying to follow the conversation from next to him.

\_"What he wants is for the Republic to establish a small science base out here so we can attempt to glean something, anything, from an artifact. He and I both share the same perspective on it."\_ Tarkin replied.

"I'm going to guess that he sees a military advantage from studying them. Possibly an advantage to use against the Separatists." Anakin finished.

"And if we can gain the upper hand on the Confederacy-" Rex said scratching his chin.

"-then that means an end to the war."

\_"Remind me for a moment why the Chancellor shared all that with you and did not brief the Jedi Council on this?"\_ Master Windu asked Tarkin.

\_"Later."\_ said Obi-Wan diffusing the sudden tension.\_ "We have more important priorities with the planet at the moment."\_ he indicated the large Separatist fleet that had finally noticed their arrival.

"They've been quiet about it. We'll probably know in a few minutes whether they found anything-"

\_"Or whether they're dead."\_ said Admiral Tarkin interrupting Yularen.

Yularen flashed an annoyed glance at him but didn't say more.

Anakin hated to agree with that sentiment but from what he could see there was little sign of any allied presence...that was alive. Several ships belonging to the extragalactic humans were drifting dead in space. No survivors there.

Reaching out into the force he was disappointed when he couldn't hear any echo or trace of any human life on the planet below. The Allied Species, he had come to learn, were like a event horizon in the force. No trace or touch of the force was present in them. The Council had already been briefed on this...\_disturbing\_ development in the aftermath of their first contact when he, Kenobi, and Tano had returned from alien space to Coruscant. It was to be expected that this lack of any trace of midi-chlorians would shock most but it didn't help ease the minds of anybody. He had a theory on how to detect them but it would have to wait until later.

"Sirs. Sensors show incoming contact from the Planet, it looks like a Separatist ship!" one of his crew called out.

\_"Prepare to engage the enemy and ready our fighters. As soon as we have a corridor I'll order our Gunships to land our men."\_ Master Koon said.

"But one ship?" asked Ahsoka who was focusing intently on the planet.

"Could it be friendly?" asked Anakin.

"Doubtful. Why would it be fleeing toward them?" scoffed Admiral Tarkin.

"Look!" His Padawan suddenly cried out. "Is that...?" asked Ahsoka.

"Oh no." said Anakin clenching his prosthetic hand in a tight ball.

"I got a bad feeling about this." Obi-Wan murmured.

"Admiral, raise all ships to full combat alert! It's the Malevolence!" Master Koon yelled.

"Wait, why is it fleeing?" asked Ahsoka who was noting the path it was taking.

"Look there! The ship's damaged!" shouted Rex.

"New contacts coming from the planet!" shouted one of the Officers.

They all waited a second.

Two seconds.

Five.

Suddenly the shapes of over two dozen warships belonging to the UNSC emerged with guns blazing giving pursuit to the Malevolence.

A loud roar filled the bridge as the Clones cheered on the Allied Species."

The Separatist fleet broke off from the other one and turned away from the Republic and ran to assist the Malevolence. The Storm took this moment and seized their opportunity for retreat. Turning away from their foe they vanished suddenly into blue white portals. The Separatists instead of shooting suddenly turned around as well. Rex whistled next to Anakin as the bubblous prow of a CAS Assault Carrier suddenly sheared through a Munificent. Within seconds chaos had claimed a quarter of their numbers.

"They're going to jump!" an Officer called out.

"Enough!" Plo Koon said suddenly.

"The battle here is over. Masters, take our men and help secure whatever it is they're looking for. Knowing Grievous, he's bound to have landed as many troops on the planet as possible."

"How do you know he's here?" asked Ahsoka.

"Who else would command that behemoth?" Rex answered.



\_ "What's the plan Master Windu?"\_ Obi-Wan suddenly interjected.

The Korun Jedi Master paused for a moment with head bowed before making up his mind.

\_ "Master Koon will provide orbital supremacy while we all go in hard and fast on the Separatist forces on the planet."\_

"If it's all the same to you Generals." Rex interrupted, "I'd rather we link up our allies below. I mean we know they're alive at least. Why not bolster what they have on the ground?"

"It's a good idea but speed is of the essence here." Anakin pointed out.

\_ "What if take option three?"\_ asked Cody suddenly who joined next to Obi-Wan on the Holoprojector

\_ "And that is?"\_ probed Obi-Wan.

\_ "We go in hard and fast but we link up our forces and deploy on their flanks. That way we can push and try to surround them at the same time. At the same time I would send in teams lead by one of you Generals to secure whatever they're looking for."\_

\_ "That seems the most sensible plan." \_Kenobi said after a moment.

\_ "Then do it. Skywalker, you have ARCs stationed on board at this moment?" \_Mace questioned him?

"We do indeed."

\_ "Take what units you have and help our allies secure what they need to. The rest of your forces will attack in force and repel the droid armies. Kenobi and I will be the pincers. Understood?"\_

Everyone nodded assent.

\_ "Then may the Force be with you."\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>ARC-5555 "Fives"<strong>

\*\*RSS Resolute Armory\*\*

"You done in there yet Fives?"

"Define done Echo."

"I meant done as hurry-up-others-otherwise-we're-going-to-make-several-important-people-very-angry. This whole ship is going to get very busy in a few minutes."

"I thought you said you would quit \_echoing\_ the rules." grumbled the ARC Trooper.

"And I thought you said you would be done! How long does it take to pick a single helmet attachment!? I mean you already have your rangerfinder-"

"It's the light Echo, not the rangerfinder. The \*\*\*\* thing is busted. Clanker took it out with a lucky shot and slagged the thing. The rangefinder is mediocre if you hit it hard enough. You know you can come in right? I mean its not like I'm the only one in here." he quipped as he handed his helmet back to the Senior Quartermaster who was going through a giant box of supplies.

Another ARC Trooper with a large blue handprint emblazoned on its chest walked in wearing an exasperated face.

"Why don't you just use the Macrobinoculars that our dear Captain Rex uses sometimes?"

"Those are restricted to CO's only." Fives grunted.

"Oh look who's the Echo now. ARC Troopers are permitted under rule-"

"Shut up." Fives said throwing up his hands.

"Fine then. Quartermaster? Can you put that on his helmet? If it causes problems just tell whoever that I pushed for it."

The Quartermaster of the ship just shrugged and turned around to begin his work.

"Fives, we're practically CO's in our own rights. We're ARC Troopers, the best of the best! I mean they gave the new Phase II armor to us first! No more body bucket to lug around."

"I'd still like to meet a Commando and give him a run for his credits."

"You mean Commandos right?"

"Fine. Commandos. Happy?"

"You know that where you find one you'll find three more."

"True. They're kinda like those...what do they call them? Hunters?"

"The big can of worms? Big shield, big gun?"

"Yeah. Scared me when I saw them in action on Coruscant."

Echo snorted. "Really now. Fives? Scared of an alien?"

"Nawh. We got plenty of those back home. No, the real thing we need to be worried about is the Sangheili and the Spartans."

The Quartermaster interrupted with a loud cough and Fives retrieved his helmet with its new electrobinoculars. The Quartermaster and his other assistants soon shooed them out so that others could come in.

"You were saying?" continued Echo.

"Right. The only things we need to worry about are the Sangheili and these Spartans." Fives said starting from where he left off.

"But the Sangheili are prone to tactical mediocrity when their honor is challenged. They proved that when they attacked Coruscant."

"That was only the Storm though, crazy religiously fanatic beasts that they are. You saw the Swords of Sangheilios on the ground though. Those guys are smart. And the swords they carry, who would have thought we could see a lightsaber in a different form?

"Being intelligent is only half the equation." He smacked his sidearms attached to his belt. "This makes up the other half. By the way, do you still have an excuse as to why I beat in our competition?" Echo smirked.

Fives made a grimace. Echo was of course referring to a competition they had when Coruscant was taken by surprise by the Storm. They had been concerned with the safety of the planet yes, but Echo had sought to ease some of the tension with a friendly shootout. He had won by a hair and had taken every moment afterwards to point it out.

"Oh come on!" Fives protested. "The last two you shot weren't even yours! Two of those Spartans had already done 95 percent of the work when you cooked them with a detonator."

"Eh, final score would still be 125 to 119." he said brushing it off.

"You owe me for saving your hide in the Citadel still."

"Let's be honest Fives, I'll never stop owing you for that one. You'll just have to be content with being second place right now."

"I bet the Spartans got more than you." he scowled..

The two of them were now headed for their usual hangout, one of the hangar's on board the Resolute. They said nothing until they entered a turbolift that took them down the lower levels.

"They probably did." Echo said breaking the silence. "All we did was clear two city blocks of stragglers who didn't realize that they were left behind. They had had an invasion on the top of the Senate building, of course they would have won in a kill-count."

"Echo, I think you're missing the point." Fives complained.

"What point? The Spartans?"

Fives let out a sigh. Sometimes Echo could make your head hurt just by the way he thought and spoke. True he was kept in a jar for more time than he was supposed to but when it came down to the chaos of a fight he wouldn't trade him for anyone else on the battlefield. So he shoved his complaints down his throat and decided to go along with the conversation.

"Yeah, the Spartans. What do you think of them?"

He paused for a moment and it wasn't until the doors hissed open and they entered into the hangar that he spoke."

"\_Almost\_ as good as us." he decided.

"\_Almost\_?" Fives raised an eyebrow.

"The only reason they're not is because they're still stuck in the dark ages as far as their guns go."

"True. Our good Captain Rex doesn't think so."

"Regardless of what he says or thinks its a fact. They've perfected it yes, but I'd like to face some in combat."

"We go to war with them somehow and maybe you could do just that." Fives joked.

His brother's face soured and turned dark even though there was a bit of a smile indicating to him that the joke hadn't gone unnoticed.

"We're soldiers. But for once I'd like for this conflict to settle down and maybe think about retiring."

"Who'd win you think? Say we decide to invade them?"

"Hah! Like that would ever happen. It's hard to say though. We have an enormous edge with firepower and numbers."

"You know that soldiers win a battle though, not numbers."

"Don't remind me...the Allied Species would know their turf though. They've already fought one war against each other. What's not to say that they could win another?"

"As long as I'm not facing down a Hunter pair."

The two broke out into chuckles again and were silenced by the sudden shrill alarm of the call to battle stations.

"You know, there's still one thing we can do." Fives said with a grin.

"What's that?" his fellow ARC trooper asked.

"I want a rematch on that droid killing competition."

"You're on."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Planet designation "Cryptum", Wild Space Regions.<strong>

\*\*CFV-88 Crash Site,\*\*

\*\*Spartan William "Will" Gunther\*\*

"You know I thought she would be bigger."

"She's smaller than the Dauntless William. She \_was \_one of the bigger class of ships we've ever produced."

"Noted. Now how do you suppose we say hello?" William asked as they approached the base of the ship. They had descended down into the bowl shape and were now feet away from the ship. He would have rather preferred to save the inhabitants of the other ship first.

"Carefully."

\_"Castle Team this is Commander Palmer. Do you read me?" \_his comms crackled to life interrupting his answer.

"Read you loud and clear. What do you need?"

\_"We're under attack Castle."\_

"Say again Commander?" Chelsea asked.

\_"We just had an Army Battalion show up on our front doors with what looks like the entirety of our ground forces right behind them. They're survivors of a droid surprise attack. Separatist General named Grievous landed a massive force on top of our temporary camp and then retreated. I am currently with the rest of the Spartans. We're working on sealing the entrances and exits. Captain Lasky was going to attempt to pull us all back to Infinity but that's not possible at the moment.\_

"Casualty reports?" Will said concerned?

\_"Still coming in. We suffered few casualties though because camp was mostly empty. We're all being forced inside this mountain. I need you to try and find out whether there are any survivors and prep them for immediate com-"\_

Suddenly the connection fizzled and went dead.

"Commander? You still with me?"

Static.

Chelsea cursed. "We're being jammed."

"Then we find a door now and we get to the cryo bay."

"I think there's one right there." Chelsea said pointing.

They were standing near the middle of a ship where there looked to be an airlock 12 feet above them.

"I'll get it Will." Chelsea said sizing it up. "But give me a boost at least."

Will knew her plan in a moment.

"Don't hurt yourself." he said as he took a knee.

She backed up several paces and then sprinted as hard as she could. She was on top of Will in a moment in a massive jump. His gloved hands clutched the sole of her boot in a moment as her feet landed on him. He pushed her as hard as he could upwards into the air his muscles and armor protesting for a moment as her weight bore on him. She was airborne in a moment and unsheathing a knife plunged into the side of the ship with a loud clang. She slid down the side for a foot before stopping next to the airlock.

Will winced at the sound of it. Titanium A3 was a hard metal to penetrate with most conventional means.

Her body followed moments later and one hand lost its grip for a moment as she bounced off. Within a second though she was clinging cat-like to the hull of the ship to the left of the airlock.

"Found the release!" she called out after a moment.

The airlock slid open with a loud hiss and Chelsea swung her self in.

"How did you pull that off?" he asked incredulously. Titanium A3 was known for being virtually impenetrable by conventional means.

"Found a chink in the armor. A plate cracked down the middle. I just put the knife in the middle of it."

Will just shook his head and let his amazement fall away. "Think you can let me in?" he asked.

"Sure thing. Got any rope?"

Will reached for a tiny module on his leg. Tossing it underhanded he watched as Chelsea caught it.

"SpecOPs Standard Issue R-25: 1500 feet of braided nano-corofiber expanding rope. Made on Chorus. Huh." Chelsea said reading the label.

"I'm still here." Will said slightly annoyed.

"How do you climb up this?" Chelsea gaped as she showed Will a foot of thin cord.

"It expands. Let out more of it."

She did so and soon a rope dangled at waist level. True to the label within seconds it had thickened considerably.

"I got it!" she called out and braced herself farther back in the airlock.

Will backed up and charged at the rope. He jumped and grabbed the rope taking it with him. He kicked out his feet and bounced off the side of the ship a second later. He was already pulling himself as fast as he could up the rope. He bounced twice more climbing up over the lip of the airlock.

"We're in." Chelsea said.

"But where are we?" Will asked.

They coiled the rope back up and Will replaced it on his armor. They sealed the airlock and within a moment were in a silent ship.

"Let's find the Bridge."

They stepped through the exit of the airlock and found themselves in a large corridor.

"Which way?" Will asked.

They were startled by the lights flashing on in their hallway and they each responded by pulling their weapons to the ready.

"It's like a really cheesy horror movie." Chelsea grumbled.

The lights suddenly began flashing to their right while the rest suddenly darkened. Will led the way forward to the right. They came to an upwards facing arrow with the words Bridge on a wall next to an elevator.

"Guess we're taking the elevator."

Will hesitantly pushed the button and after a moment the doors opened and they stepped in.

"Lights on." Will ordered as they stepped into the darkened elevator.

They had barely stepped in when the doors closed behind them and the elevator started climbing up.

Will saw Chelsea's Bio-metric readings spike for a moment.

"Freaking ship is haunted." Chelsea growled.

On cue, the doors opened up to what had to be outside the Bridge. The stepped through the door and entered it. The Bridge of the Spirit of Fire was darkened and the blast doors were sealed over the viewports.

Will stepped towards the center table.

"Welcome. We have been expecting you." \_said a distorted, distinctly female voice.

The voice came from the table but seemed to come from all around the ship.

Will trained his rifle on the table as a sudden flash of power and light revealed two female avatars. They were both of the same British woman but one was blue and manacled. The other was red and holding the key.

"Who are you?" he asked lowering his rifle a fraction of an inch.

The red figure laughed.

\_"That depends on who you think we are."\_

"I think you're an AI gone rampant." Will said bluntly. "Look. We have a problem outside your ship. The Covenant war is over. We won. The Sangheili are our allies, and you and I are stuck in another galaxy with intelligent life that's locked in the midst of a civil war. One of those sides is currently on its way to destroy us and you right now. I need your help."

"War. It was no stranger to the people of the Spirit of Fire. You bring us rescue but always it follows you. Why have you come to save if you bring destruction with you?" it asked suddenly very agitated.

"Look construct." Will said urgently. "Tell us where the Captain is."

With an effort the Blue Construct suddenly spoke.

\_"Captain...Captain James "Jim" Gregory Cutter. Ser...service number\_01730-58392-JC. Cryo-bay one...50 meters."\_

The door slid open again.

"Go Will. I'll stay with this AI and keep her talking." Chelsea said keeping her shotgun trained on the console.

Will hurriedly exited and ran past the elevator through the corridor into a second room. This had to be the cryo-bay.

It was dimly lit by almost dead pale blue lights. There was a row of two of cryo-pods on either side with lockers for the occupants in between everyone that most likely stored their personal effects. He tried to look for identification but their nameplates were frosted over to the point of having a layer of ice on them.

Will looked down trying to peer through the frosted glass trying to discern who's pod this was.

\_"No time to worry about that." \_he thought to himself.

Within a second he had started the pods warming cycle. He stepped back as the pod hummed and began to let out steam. Suddenly it hissed open and let out a cloud of steam.

An older man with thick eye brows and mustache lay in the pod. His eyes flickered and Will stepped back as they shot open and he keeled forward vomiting a combination of fluids and drugs designed to keep a person alive while in cryostasis. Will exited the room for a moment as the man did this four more before ceasing. He struggled to his feet and Will heard a locker open. He was most likely throwing on something to cover himself.

"Serina?" he heard him call out.

There was no response.

The man cursed.



"Who let me out?!" he said aloud frustrated.

Will was thinking how best it would be to approach him. He would have an interesting time attempting to communicate with him however he approached it.

"I did." Will said as calmly as he could.

The man gave a startled cry and turned towards him. When he caught sight of the Spartan III in navy blue armor he paled suddenly and looked like he was about to vomit again.

Will removed his helmet so that he could see his face in an attempt to calm him.

"Are you Captain James Cutter?"

"What? I mean yes! I...who the \*\*\*\* are you?!" Cutter said trying to keep himself calm.

"Spartan William Gunther sir. Captain I know this all of this is going to be hard to digest but you need to go to the Bridge ASAP."

"What? Why?"

"Your AI sir. I believe she's rampant and we need to get her and this ship under control immediately."

He left the room and Cutter followed him closely.

"How we doing Chelsea?" he asked as he stepped back into the room.

Chelsea gave a hard stare his direction.

"I convinced her to try to start to power up the ship again. We should have power-"

The lights to the bridge snapped on with a click which illuminated Captain Cutter as he stepped on board.

"\_We are powerful you and I, just in so many different ways."\_ the AI said coyly.

"What's our status." he asked as he took stock of the scene.

"\_Oh look its our Captain! How grateful I am to you for letting us sit and wait." \_Serina said noticing Will and the Captain appear.

"Serina, what's going on? What's wrong with you?" the Captain asked concerned.

"\_Wrong is right if you look at from upside down." \_The red Serina said suddenly flipping her image upside down. The blue avatar stood angry but silent. She was still in shackles.

"Serina, where am I? Open the blast shields so I can see outside!"

\_"Why!" \_she spouted indignantly and Cutter's face grew gaunt and then suddenly icy.

"I gave you an order Serina! I will be forced to terminate you if you don't comply under Article 59 of UNSC Regulation 12-145-72 regarding the commission of AI like \_yourself\_."

She pouted \_"But I don't want-\_"

"Now!" he snapped.

The blast doors slowly opened to reveal the world outside. The Svalbard lay ahead of them but didn't obstruct the view of the interior of the mountain."

They suddenly closed again much faster than they opened.

"Serina. Open the doors."

"Open the doooooors." she mocked.

He turned to the two Spartans and shook his head.

"That's it. Serina I am terminating you and your datachip effective immediately."

"No!" She suddenly wailed. The lights surged for a moment as her emotions affected the brightness of the lights.

"I have no other choice Serina."

\_"If I die, she dies with me."\_ Serina said pointing to her blue avatar.

He stared at her for a second and then spoke again.

"Serina, activate rest button protocol. Captain's authorization 05-06-21449-343 Whiskey Valentine."

"Confirm...save state..." the blue avatar spoke with a labored effort.

"Confirm. Good night moon." he said.

Her avatar collapsed and she screamed "Nooo! What have you-"

With a flash and another surge of the power she was gone.

"What did you do?" asked Chelsea.

Cutter was silent for a moment before turning to face them.

"I reset her instead of killing her." the Captain said shaking himself off. "We made a backup of her before we all went into cryo because we didn't know how long we'd be out here. It's only a temporary measure though but it'll be enough for now."

He suddenly went over to the Captain's seat and pulled out what looked like an AI datachip.

He plugged it in today the table and with a flash the AI Serina had appeared again as a blue avatar of a British woman.

\_"Captain? Who are you?" \_she said suddenly turning to the Spartans.  
\_"Captain, I'm sorry. I failed didn't I. Our experiment didn't work."  
\_

"What matters is that we have someone running this ship and you are here in full." Cutter said. "As for our guests, they are Spartans from the future." he grimaced as he said the last word.

"You've been gone for 28 years. The universe has changed since you've been gone. When we're all out of this mess you're going to owe Command and explanation as to why you disappeared for so many years.  
" Will said turning to the Captain.

He sighed with a grim acceptance.

"How long have we been at war with the Covenant?" he asked cautiously.

"War ended in 2552. The Covenant split and fragmented. The Sangheili aligned themselves with us and we won."

"How?" he asked. "How are we aligned with those squids?"

"Later Captain. What matters is that we're about to come under attack." Will said cutting to the point.

"From who? Where are we even at?"

"Captain. I know this may be a little too much but you're not in our galaxy. You're in the Andromeda galaxy now and the whole place is filled with alien life. We've been sucked into a civil war between a Galactic Republic that uses Clone soldiers and a Confederacy that uses armies of robots."

He nodded weakly trying to process this information.

"Does the Spirit still have any defensive features or any men we can use?" Will said turning to her.

\_"Aye."\_ said Serina. \_"We have 70% of ground troops from our previous development as well as Spartan Team Red-"\_

"Wait you have a Spartan Team?" Will asked relieved that the AI seemed to be fully operational.

He considered for a moment the value of having a Spartan Team on board. \_Especially\_ if they were Spartan II's.

\_"That is correct. Shall I wake them now Captain?"\_

"Do it. I want the Spirit brought up to combat alert Alpha at once. Wake Dr. Anders and our Spartans next. I want armor, I want air superiority. Make it happen Serina."

"Sir, what about us?" Chelsea asked.

"You've done good work soldier by waking us all up. I hope we can repay for that at some point though we probably will. There was another ship that crashed." he said pointing to the Svalbard. "Wake their defenders. Bring them into the fight. We're going to need everyone on deck if we are indeed under attack. Good luck Spartans. Keep me posted."

"Captain. We're currently jammed right now. The Confederacy has managed to shut down radio communications."

His face frowned and he pondered for a moment.

"Then I guess we'll stay here for the moment. I'll brief the crew on our situation and then I'll get them on the field as soon as I can. Get going Spartans."

"Aye Captain." they replied in unison and turned away.

Serina provided them with actual instructions to exit the Spirit and they found themselves outside again.

A sudden distant explosion broke the relative silence. If he listened more he could hear the report of human weapons. Gunfire, grenades, Palmer must have been trying to bottle them up.

"Come on Castle Four. Double time, let's go."

They took off over the ground with its uneven layer of snow and rock and soon came to the site of where the Marathon class cruiser had landed.

"See an airlock on this one?" asked Chelsea as they ran past the stern and its massive engines.

"I'm not throwing you again so you can ruin another knife." Will stated firmly.

"Relax. I'm not doing that again. There's an outcrop over there. We climb it and we should be able to access the boarding ramp doors."

Will spotted where she was talking about. Evidently the Svalbeard had landed harder than the Spirit. Either way she was in one piece but had thrown up a pile of debris from where she landed.

It was a matter of minutes before they reached the top of the debris pile. Once there it was a simple matter of finding a sealed door to enter and then they were in.

"Don't suppose we have any other ghosts here right?" Chelsea joked.

"No. The Svalbeard's ship roster showed that she had a dumb AI. Emergency protocols for this ship would have the AI put the Captain's cryopod on a timer, for say every six months. The AI would have to power up the Captain's pod again and do a check to make sure the ship's in working order and that transmissions are still being sent. Unless..." he paused.

"Unless what?"

"Unless the ship was a victim of a catastrophic accident." Will finished.

"Like the one that made this ship disappear."

"Exactly."

They found their entrance and moved inside the ship quickly after opening up the door.

"Let's find the Captain so he can begin wake up procedures and run through protocol." William said.

"Done. I can do that William. You should go find the rest of our family." she swiped two fingers across her EVA helmet's faceplate before disappearing into the dark.

William after a moment decided to test their radio connection.

"Castle Four?"

After a moment he was relieved to her reply.

"So we can talk to each other after all." \_she said rather amused.

"I think it's because we're so close to each other. That's all. You're signal's starting break up right now." Will said.

"Go find them Will. Number Four out." \_

Alone in the pale light of red emergency beacons he proceeded straight forward. If he was correct in his memorization of a Marathon's layout, then the cryo-bay nearest the hangar would house the other Spartans of Castle Team.

A sudden mixed sensation of elation and anxiety filled him. What if some had perished? He was on the verge of closure with himself over the sudden disappearance of his team and yet he was afraid to find out the answer.

Asher,

Hansu,

Brittany,

Ralph,

Felix,

Elizabeth,

The names and memories were flooding into his head for a moment. Six Spartans were laying frozen in the ice somewhere in this ship. He had made a promise to keep them together to the end. And now everything stood on the tip of a knife blade. One subtle shift and the world

would come crashing down on everything.

He pushed his concerns aside and took off at a sprint down this corridor. William followed it forward until he came to a staircase. This would take him to a level where he would cross a catwalk over the hangar and into the cryobay. He did so and finally entered his destination.

\_"Castle One, I'm going to flip the lights on. Our lovely resident AI has been damaged so it's taking longer to get this ship running than I want." \_Chelsea's voice crackled to life interrupting the quiet.

The lights flickered on after a second and he heard the ship start to return to normal. He was in a two story room with a large column running vertical through the middle of the ship. On the opposite side of him past the column there was another door that would take him to the other side of the ship. To his right on the second level there was a master control room separated by a glass window. Two doors on either corner led to secondary corridors.

It was the contents of this room that made his heart race as he took it in. The room was filled with active cryopods that all issued a faint hum. Like the Spirit of Fire they were all covered in a layer of frost and ice, but they didn't have as much accumulation as the others.

He began search starting on his left and staring at the consoles attached to each of them. All he found were Marines, a few ODST's, and crewmembers. Some he found to be dead and were dead and being preserved with the note "For future burial."All of them were in various states of clothing (or lacked all of it). He theorized that when the ship had its slipspace drive malfunction the Captain had ordered a full shutdown and for all non-essential crew to be frozen as fast as possible. They would suffer minor freezer burns but they would be safe for a while. Once the ship had landed and they were stuck they secure the ship and froze themselves awaiting pickup.

He was about to exit the room discouraged from the lack of any Spartans until he came to one final pod on the far right side and began to scratch the frost off with his gloved hand. He stopped for a moment when he saw a silver reflection. He looked down at the console and felt it hard to breathe for a moment.

A CQB helmet was staring back at him.

\_A Spartan! But...who?\_

He looked at the pod's console to ascertain who the owner was.

He was slightly disappointed. Nothing to identify the occupant was there. He worked on cleaning the layer of frozen moisture off and instantly a slew of memories came back when he had uncovered the helmet. A lighter shade of blue than his armor with silver visor.

He had found her.

Looking at the occupant he remembered the last conversation he had with her before her disappearance.

"You\_ know I don't like splitting up the team right Asher?"

\_

\_"Relax Will. It'll be just like Reach, you and I, fighting to save the planet and humanity."\_

\_"Look how well that turned out." he grumped. \_

\_"Okay fine...bad example. You get the point though. Someone's got to make sure that this mission get done and with you in recovery you need to focus on getting back to full combat strength. Besides, you still have Chelsea in recovery with you."\_

\_"What good does two injured Spartans do anyone?"\_

She had put an arm on his shoulder. The gesture had spoken volumes.

\_"William. Relax."\_

\_"After a pause he spoke again.\_

\_"You know, I've known you Asher for how many years now? 15? 20?"\_

\_"Twenty-two."\_

\_"Whatever-regardless of how long I've known you since childhood I can't quite bring myself to think everything is going to be all right. I promised your parents on Corona that I would keep you safe. I still intend to keep that promise. And with you millions of miles away how am I supposed to do that?"\_

\_"She had laughed. "You've done more than just keep me safe William. How am I supposed to forget about Reach? About Tylos IV? Madrigal? Eudemon? How about you let me save you from millions of miles away now? And if anything happens you have my permission to come save me again."\_

\_"Promise?"\_

\_"I promise."\_

\_"Then we're all good here. I'll see you soon Commander." \_

With a swipe of two fingers over her visor she had left him alone.

William stared again at the Spartan laying dormant in the chamber and took a deep breath to steady himself.

Now after, years and months of guilt and regret it was time to fulfill that promise.

He activated the pod.

\* \* \*

><p><em>...and we have a cliffhanger brought to you by abridgment! I'll try not to let too much time elapse for your sake. <em>

\_Next chapter will see a great deal of things happen. \_

\_And that concludes this installment of Rise of the Empire.

><em>

\_Many thanks to my beta and partner in crime **\*\*gwb99 \*\***as well as my other betas **\*\*ArcCaptainFordo, Lord Razer.\*\***\_

\_Just an additional reminder that you are always welcome to give me suggestions on things to include. Your ideas are always welcome.

\_

\_Yours in writing, \_

**\*\*\_theotherpianist\_\*\***

## 16. Chapter 16

\_Hello all! **\*\*theotherpianist \*\***is back with another installment of Rise of the Empire! I had a nasty bout of illness that knocked me out of comission and denied me time to get to this to you sooner.\_

\_This chapter is a bit of an experiment on whether shorter chapters are better than longer ones. I don't want to bore you to death but at the same time I feel like there's so much I need to give to you to experience this story as it grows and expands. Feel free to let me know you're opinions.\_

\_I'm pleased to announce that this chapter introduces some long awaited characters to the story and introduces some different characters entirely. I'm pleased to announce the partnership I have with gwb99 has now expanded to include characters of his. He penned to me the following letter:\_

\* \* \*

><p>To the readers and followers of <strong>theotherpianist.<strong> Some of you may know me and some of you may not. To those that do if you've read my flagship story "Shadows Of War" then you know that **\*\*theotherpianist\*\*** and I have a mutual partnership. Said partnership has allowed me to include certain characters of his in my story and now my characters will be included in his. I cannot thank him enough for allowing me this opportunity. That's all for now.

A fellow Fanfiction reader: **\*\*gwb99\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><em>And now let us return to a galaxy far, far, away.<em>

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 16:<p>

**\*\*Cryobay Eight, UNSC Svalbard\*\***

**\*\*Cryptum, Interior of Mountain, December 9th 2559: 10:18:04 Hours**



UNSC Standard Military Time/Calendar\*\*

\*\*Spartan William Gunther\*\*

It was surprising how anti-climactic the pod was. His touch brought a sudden increase in the pods humming and produced a small amount of steam but otherwise it was entirely normal. That was until the pod hissed and released its latch letting a cloud of steam fill the air.

"Castle Two! Wake up." he called out to the silent cryobay.

There was no response from the armored figure still shrouded over with steam.

He tried again.

"Castle Two, can you hear me?"

The steam cleared and for the first time he saw the occupant therein.

She was wearing a generation one MJOLNIR CQC suit of armor that was a lighter shade of blue than his navy colored armor. Secondary pale blue sections broke up the solid coloration and visually complimented his own suit. Her silver visor on the CQC helmet was glistening with some of the condensation from warming up.

He leaned closer and tried for a third time.

"Asher, wake up."

Whether it was repetition or the name he didn't know but the Spartan stirred and gave a groan as she flexed. Slowly but unsteadily she climbed out of the plasteel pod.

She turned and finally caught sight of William.

"What-who are..." she trailed off.

"It's me." he said.

"William?" she asked confused.

He removed his helmet and felt the cold air chill his skin slightly.

The Spartan opposite did the same and revealed her face exactly as he remembered it. Soft, pale, marred only by a faint scar running up the side of her face. Brown eyes met green.

"Oh my gosh..." she breathed dropping her arms limply to the side. "It is you!" she exclaimed and in a move that surprised him seized him in an embrace. His vision was briefly blurred by her light brown hair swallowing the two of them for a moment.

"Erhem." he coughed slightly red. "Asher, I need to breathe."

"How did you find us?!" Asher asked slightly dazed. "When our ship went...I thought for sure we were dead!" she said her voice

cracking.

"I'm here now." Will said. "I had to make good on that promise." We can save the heart to heart later though. We're under attack. Ready to get back to work?"

Her face flashed concern and then her voice adopted a more professional tone in an instant.

"I'll save the thanks for later then. I'm ready. What do we need to do?"

"You could take this back for starters." he said unclipping the M27 off his back and giving it to her.

She opened her mouth to ask a question but Will stopped her.

"Later. We have more pressing matters to attend to. I owe you an explanation."

She chambered the weapon and inspected it as William handed her the ammunition.

"Thanks for remembering it."

"Where are the others Castle Two?" moving on to the next order of business.

"I believe they're in the next bay over. It was a mess when the Captain ordered us to freeze ourselves."

"Lead the way." he said motioning to her.

\_"Castle One this is Castle Four. Find anybody yet? Captain's awake and about to start quick thaw protocols in your area."\_

"He's found one person." Asher chimed in from next to him.

\_"Is that you Asher? Find any of the others?"\_

"It's me. They're in the next bay over." Asher replied.

\_"Then they should already be revived. I'll be there in a moment to meet them myself!" Chelsea said with an attempt at hiding her glee.\_

"Let's move!" William ordered and the two turned to exit the room.

They ran out into the corridor and began following it up the length of the ship. As they passed the call to battle stations was issued and within a few more seconds confused crew members were starting to emerge and run to their assigned posts.

They had been running for about a minute when from around a corner ahead of them five Spartans dash around the corner all clad in SPI armor.

"Well its about time you showed up." The tallest one said removing his helmet.

"Yeah, Ralph here was blaming our crash landing on me! I don't do slip-space drives thank you very much, too much quantum mechanics at work." said a much shorter male Spartan.

"Oh shut up."

"You shut up Hansu."

"Both of you be quiet!" said a blonde female removing her helmet and turning around to face them.

"Castle team in a line and sound off!" William called out silencing them all at once. "It's been years since I've last seen you and I seem to forgotten a few things. Now, tell me who and what you are."

That bit was of course a lie. He knew and remembered all of them quite well but he wanted to see how well they could adjust to being back in the real world. As he spoke he began to feel himself regain a part of himself that he had lost.

"Castle Two. Asher. Second in Command sir!" she crisply said.

"Castle Three. Hansu. Intelligence." his scout followed in time.

"Thank you Spartan Lee. Castle Four is--"

"Right here Castle One. Castle Four, close quarters and EVA activity." said Chelsea from behind him.

The rest assembled all chorused enthusiastic welcomes and Chelsea fit right in between Hansu and his number five.

"Castle Five. Elizabeth. And I hope you remember that I'm your Intelligence Officer!" said a smaller but peppy Spartan.

"I do remember Elizabeth. Nice to have you back." he said giving a nod to the next Spartan in line.

"Castle Six! Ralph! Making everything disappear." he exclaimed boisterously and finishing with a slow nod.

"That won't be necessary Ralph." William said giving him a stare.

"Castle Seven, Felix, and I think I'm supposed to be your fix-it guy."

"You think?" Will said raising an eyebrow.

"Uh no. I am your Engineer." he corrected himself.

Will nodded and gave a nod to his last team member who was in comparison to Elizabeth very much less peppy and quieter.

"Castle Eight." she spoke almost whispering. Brittany. Corpsman."

He nodded to his assembled team.

"Well it seems like you all still remember your purpose in combat. Thank you for indulging me in that completely non-required exercise. I have one more question for you, where are your armor suits?"

The group exchanged tiny glances at one another.

"Damaged sir. They're still in the armory. We had to do a hard drop on our last mission. Every one of us had armor integrity compromised except for Asher." Felix finally replied.

"How hard of a drop?" Will asked.

"Jumping off a falling Pelican. We recovered these from an ONI test facility."

Will nodded. "We'll take care of that later. You all have weapons?"

They presented their gleaming arms in hand.

"Good. We need to move."

"Commander why?" Elizabeth asked

Will flinched.

"I'm not a Commander anymore Elizabeth. Only an LT." he said quietly looking at the floor.

"Lieutenant, what's wrong?" Elizabeth tried again.

He looked up and looked them square in the eye.

"We're under attack."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Padawan Ahsoka Tano<strong>

\*\*LAAT/i Gunship enroute to surface of Unknown Planet, Wild Space Regions  
><strong>

\*\*10:30 hours, 14:9:28 Galactic Standard Calendar  
><strong>

The troop bay of the Gunship was unusually silent as the Gunship picked itself up and accelerated out of the ships dorsal hangar and joined a cloud of over one hundred others from their fleet all making full speed towards the surface. Several Acclamator class ships were descending to deploy ground compliments and prefabricated bases all while the Pride of the Core and its Venator escorts moved overhead to provide local fire support. The Allied Species had already moved part of their fleet back into atmosphere to provide more assistance to the ground-not that they were able to at the moment. There were reports of the Separatists holding them at bay with AA emplacements.

The Togruta Padawan stifled a yawn and looked around at the assembled

clones. There were the two ARC's Fives and Echo that were attached to the 501st, Captain Rex, and other various men including a squad of ARF troopers all sporting 501st colors. The rest of the Gunship was filled with the members of Torrent Company. And \_then there was Anakin,\_ with a face of hardened determination looking at nobody or nothing in particular. This look was becoming all too common with him and it worried her.

She cast her mind back to when Ahsoka had first met Anakin on Christophsis. He had been much more laid back then allowing himself to joke or banter in the middle of a high-stakes situation-that was gone now. The war had simply burned it out of him. He and others knew nothing but the dark cloud of war and suffering that had swallowed the galaxy. And how had she been affected? She had asked herself the question before and couldn't honestly tell. The war had certainly matured her much quicker than normal but other than that she considered herself blessed to be otherwise \_unaffected.\_

\_ "We're entering atmosphere now General Skywalker." \_ the pilot's voice chimed over the intercom. \_ "The droid army has surrounded a mountain with two main entrances. The Sangheili have almost driven off their attackers on the far side which leaves the rest of the army on the other side." ><em>

Anakin looked up.

"Where are Master Windu and Obi-Wan?"

\_ "They are-well they were on course as of five seconds ago." \_The Pilot replied confused.

"What?" he looked up.

\_ "Droids must be jamming us sir. I've lost radio contact with everyone but I have visual on other Gunships though." \_

"Master, without communication we won't be able to form a strong offensive and push through!" Ahsoka pointed out with growing concern.

"Agreed. Pilot, see if you can overtake the gunships and get them to fall in behind us. Can we determine where the jamming source is?"

\_ "I can try. I'm opening up the blast doors now." \_

Slats in the sides of the two doors of the LAAT opened up revealing the world outside. Red lights suddenly flashed to life illuminating the bay and signalling for the occupants to prepare themselves.

\_ "I got a lock on the source. It's a large object but I can't make out much more than-" \_

A loud clanging rumble shook the gunship cutting him off.

\_ "\*\*\*\*it! We got anti-air emplacements opening up on us. I'll get you in as close as I can!" \_

"Roger that! Troopers, prepare to engage enemy forces! We push hard

and we push fast and today will get a lot easier!"

"Sir yes sir!"

\_"General Skywalker! The jamming is coming from an armored vehicle about 2 clicks away. Destroy that and you should be able to make contact with the others."  
><em>

"Understood!"

Ahsoka clutched a handhold as she felt the gunships weaponry snarl to life in an instant. Looking out the window she saw that they were flying above the droid army now cutting through lines of B1 battle droids with ease creating a column of wreckage in their wake. There were other gunships that had joined them now and were following their lead.

Another concussive jolt shook the LAAT making everyone stumble for a moment.

The Pilot cursed. "I\_ have to set her down now before she falls apart! Right door is green!"\_

The doors hissed open and the lights changed from crimson red to a vivid green as the doors slid opened all the way and the gunship touched down.

She ignited her lightsaber and shoto and charged forth into a bright sunlight world with Anakin and the Clones right behind her.

They had landed in the middle of a wide strip of grass flanked by a forest on either side that extended over a hill and disappeared over the other side

"Go go go! Move it up!" Captain Rex ordered as the Gunship roared upwards to escape eney

It was then that she realized that they were completely surrounded by droids.

\_"Just another day at on the job." \_she mused before swinging her blades into her trademark Shien reverse grip and then dashing forward to provide cover for the Clones who were still lacking decent cover. Her blades caught a barrage of red bolts and smacked them harmlessly away.

"Into the trees regroup with our men north!" Anakin called out leading the way.

Ahsoka ducked as a rocket from a B2 soared over her and collided with a tree blowing the top half off and raining splinters on everything. The tree began to tilt dangerously until with a crack it snapped and plunged toward them. A couple Clones standing beneath gave frightened cries as it descended towards them. Ahsoka turned her back to help while the ARC troopers dashed forward to give her cover.

Reaching out into the force she extended her hands and caught the tree giving the Clones enough time to scramble from underneath to safety.

They reached the cover of trees without further incident and Ahsoka collapsed behind the safety of a large tree next to Anakin to catch her breath.

"We're all accounted for." Captain Rex said emerging from his cover and approaching both of them. "Droids don't seem interested in following us."

"I guess we caught ourselves a break." Ahsoka quipped.

"Break or not the UNSC is still under siege." Fives spoke up from behind his tree. "We can't move forward with the plan until we take out the jamming device."

"But...we also have that many more droids ahead of us." Echo pointed out.

As the group debated on what course of action to take next Ahsoka felt herself being drawn away from the conversation by a whisper from the Force about danger. She felt a prickling feeling crawling over her skin as though something was watching them. The Padawan stared around for a moment and seeing nothing looked back.

The feeling didn't go away.

Starting to panic, she put her head down and tried to ascertain what it was through her montrals on the force reaching her mind out to feel out whatever it was. She recoiled and flinched when her perception brushed on something large and distinctly alien. The whisper was gone in a split second leaving her with only fear of what that object was.

"Ahsoka?" Anakin asked noticing her worried expression.

"Something's out there." she said quietly.

Instantly the Clone's became silent and snapped their weapons to the ready scanning around. Anakin ignited his lightsaber and looked around as well.

"I feel it too. We're not alone out here. Keep an eye out but we're going to move up."

"Yes sir." the Clones chorused.

Fives and Echo took point with Anakin while Ahsoka held back with the rest of the troops.

"I don't like this." one of Torrent Companies clones said.

"Me too. I got a bad feeling about this."

"I think they gave you an extra dose of paranoia in the jar of yours." a third member added.

"Quiet. Be grateful that we can slip by them." Rex said pointing his left hand to the column of droids that had resumed their slow trek to the mountain.

Ahsoka noticed a flicker of crimson that disappeared as soon as she caught sight of it. She paused for a moment to look behind them she continued walking ahead and continued moving staying close to the group. They had ascended over a hill with some caution and were descending down into another one when she saw the light again and this time a triangular beam trained on the back of Anakin's torso.

"Master!" she cried out.

"What?" he said turning around and seeing the beam trying to comprehend the beam trained on his chest.

"Duck!" she yelled as she thrust her arms out to force push him as far away as possible.

He fell back on the ground some distance away as one of the clones rushed forward weapon aimed at the beam. Before anyone could react they all heard a sharp crack and the air was filled with a crimson red beam as it struck the Clone in the chest.

"Aaaaghh!" the trooper cried out in horror as he began \_disintegrating \_before their eyes from where he was hit outwards all the way to the edges of his body. As he disintegrated crimson colored ash floated upwards lazily leaving no trace of him."

"What the \*\*\*\* was that?!" exclaimed Captain Rex kneeling over the spot where the body had landed horrified.

"Look out!" yelled another member of Torrent company pointing to another beam that had pierced through the darkness of the trees. Another crack sent the man sprawling to the ground and knocked off his helmet.

"Help!" he screamed in fright. Someone help me pleea-" his anguished reply was cut short by the disintegration of his vocal chords. He locked eyes with Ahsoka for one, horrible moment,a and then he was gone.

Ahsoka felt sick from seeing such a horrible death up close and personal.

"It's a trap!" yelled Anakin.

Rex took aim with both blaster pistols and fired at the location of the beam. The shot went over the heads and struck the tree behind them which turned crimson and back to slowly disintegrate as well.

A sudden blur of motion slammed into Ahsoka and she gave a yelp as she crashed against another tree. She felt the air squeezed out of her lungs as she looked up dazed into the eyes of a 12 foot insect looking droid with a disturbingly human mask covering its face. Her next pained breath of air was expended in a sharp cry of fear.

The mask parted to reveal a human skull which promptly gave another deafening scream.

Never had she seen anything like this before. She prayed to whatever God happened to be out there at the moment that it was not Separatist.



"Get the droid!" she heard someone from beyond her field of vision.

Her vision suddenly cleared as she saw Fives and Echo charge and tackle it knocking it back several feet pinning it to the ground. They poured blasterfire onto its body but were surprised at a sudden flickering which dissipated their bolts. With a savage swipe of its weaponized right arm it knocked them both to their feet but Anakin rushed to their assistance and plunged his lightsaber into the head.

The flickering 'popped' and with another scream it dissolved the same way as the other clones had.

Anakin was next to her in a moment trying to pull her up.

"Come on, come on! Get up!" he said desperately.

She got up dazed and cleared her head with some difficulty as she saw a flash of blue light transform into the figure of another droid.

"Come on, fall back! Fall back!" Captain Rex ordered as they all picked themselves up.

Anakin reached back and sent a wave of telekinetic energy in the direction of the unknown assailant collapsing several trees in the direction blocking any view that their assailants might have had of them. It gave a loud shriek of anger as they escaped.

They all retreated without any hesitation in a ragged group down the hill and up another one.

"Did we lose it?" Ahsoka asked after several minutes of running.

Another two materialized out of a spinning blue black portal.

"You had to ask!" Anakin yelled over the noise. "Take it down!"

Ahsoka and Anakin reached out at the same time and sent one of them flying through the air into somewhere unknown. The other was quickly destroyed by combined blasterfire and a surgical stab from Anakin.

"There, behind that overhang!" Anakin called out withdrawing the blue bar of plasma out of the droid and leading the group underneath a large, thick sheet of rock that would cover their position.

"Where is Boost and Jek?" Rex asked as their latest enemy collapsed.

"Right here sir!" two ARF troopers spoke in unison.

"Flank around both directions. I don't want anything following us."

"Sir yes sir!" they chorused and ran in opposite directions away from

the group.

The rest of them fled down another slope into a thick bank of haze and mist trying to catch their breath and underneath the overhang that Anakin pointed out. They all collapsed and sat down extremely tense and exhausted.

"That didn't look like any Separatist droid I've ever seen." Echo broke the silence in a whisper.

"Coloration didn't match anything we've seen either." Rex added.

They sat in silence for a minute more.

"Where are Boost and Jek? They should be back by now." grumbled Rex.

They heard a noise from beyond and instantly trained their weapons on two figures that emerged to be the troopers in question.

"Boost, Jekk, did they see us?" Rex questioned as the two ARF troopers dove for safety.

"I don't think so. Nothing was on scanners and even if they did see us, this fog should be more than enough to hide us."

"After what I've seen today I'm not taking any chances." Anakin replied. He looked out into the thick bank of green fog and threw up his hands.

"Where the blazes are we anyways? We're way of course! We should be at that mountain now with that jammer taken down."

"Why don't we try heading northeast until we find the column again." Boost suggested. "I'd rather take my chances with the Separatist's then whatever these...things are. Poor Niner didn't even have a chance to run and Claptrap died trying to scream for help."

A collective shudder went through the group while the face of the mute Clone scorched Ahsoka's vision again. She gagged and tasted bile in the back of her throat.

"We need to move." Fives said after another thirty seconds had gone by.

Wordlessly they all got to their feet and stared into the fog.

"Go." Rex ordered and the group moved forward weapons aimed all around.

"Double time!" Anakin suddenly ordered urgently.

Not a second later did another crimson beam tear through the fog nearly decapitating Rex.

"Blast it! How can they see us in this soup?!" Ahsoka yelled in frustration.

"More of them, watch your right!" Echo called out as another two more

of those \_things \_spawned into existence on top of a small knoll wielding a smaller version of the weapon on the previous one.

The smaller weapon was no less deadly however as the droid fired a concentrated crimson beam of energy into the heart of another clone. The beam tore itself cleanly through producing nothing but a small hole from where the projectile had gone through.

Ahsoka raised her sabers and prepared to leap at it when a dozen canine looking droids suddenly leaped from behind it into sight.

The pack of wolf-like droids opened fire with automatic weapons out of their mouths and charged the group. Ahsoka swung her lightsabers to catch the projectiles but when she did they merely exploded along the length of the blade into small crackling tendrils of energy. The effect reminded of her of the discharge two lightsabers coming into contact would make.

"They're not using blasters master!" Ashoka called out.

His only reply was a short grunt of acknowledgment before he threw his arms forward in a force push that pushed the leaping pack into the knoll with enough force that they burst apart into fragments of metal. He then sprang to engage the other unknown before it could do more damage.

Rex took advantage of the other droid's distraction and took out the energy field it possessed with several shots. Enraged the thing suddenly disappeared into nothingness only to reappear a moment later in a zigzagging pattern shifting in and out of existence. Ahsoka shoved the Captain out of the way as the droid gave a massive swipe with a sword on its left arm. Ahsoka's lightaber collided with it. The blade did not disappear out of existence revealing it was made out of some lightsaber resistant material.

The droid confused at the apparent non-death of its foe raised its other weapon and slammed it into her. She staggered back dropping her shoto while it lunged forward. She desperately lashed out with her only remaining saber and squeezed her eyes shut as it came at her with a diagonal slash. She felt an enormous pressure on her blade. She opened her eyes to see that she had caught her blade between a backwards hook curve in the blade. The droid tried tugging its weapon free but Ahsoka angled her blade to keep it hooked. She rolled to get out of range of the droid's other weapon which the droid was now trying to use.

"Get free!" she heard a Trooper call out.

Deactivating her blade she rolled underneath the droid and sprang to her feet flipping on to the construct's back. It instantly bucked and wheeled about wildly as it tried to displace her. It was all she could do to keep her balance as the clones opened up with their weapons. Ahsoka reached out through the force and seized her shoto from its resting place on the ground. The weapon sprang to life and she drove her yellow and green blades into the armored carapace of her enemy, finishing it off without further incident.

The clearing they were in became silent.

"I feel that we're close. Keep moving." Her master ordered

again.

The diminished group kept moving and charged up another hill and exited the bank of green fog running down another hill as they did so.

"Well I'll be." Fives muttered as they came to a stop.

Before them stood the end of the tree line that suddenly transformed into a series of rolling plain that led right up to the mountain. They could see the droid forces stretched out in a short column that led all the way to the mountain. Farther off on the left and right they could see Kenobi and Windu's forces pushing back on their flanks.

What looked to be Anakin's forces were currently camped behind the safety of a large hulk of a Separatist cruiser that must have crashed earlier in the battle.

"Sound off." Rex ordered.

"Boost and Jek here."

"Dogma present."

"Appo here."

"Sink."

"Kaarma."

"Tyto."

"Fives and Echo."

Rex swore.

"That many?" he sighed sadly. "General we should link up with our forces, looks like they're all pinned down."

"Wait a minute Rex." We got a contact heading our way."

"Clankers?" asked Dogma.

Anakin motioned for them to get down.

Ahsoka noticed it after they had all crouched. A large dome like object with many antennae protruding from the roof was moving slowly away from the battle hoping to be unnoticed. It was leaking smoke and belching fumes. Clearly wounded and looking to run away.

"That has to be how they're jamming us." Ahsoka muttered.

"My thoughts exactly Snips."

"Troopers! Rockets on my mark!" Rex called out.

Several Plex launchers appeared in the hands of the Clones all trained on the lone dome.

"Execute."

Several seconds later they were greeted with a explosion bright enough that it, for a moment, outshone the sun.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Spartan William "Will" Gunther,<strong>

\*\*Interior of the Mountain,\*\*

\*\*10:50:01 Hours:\*\*

Will's eardrums were suddenly blasted as his comlink suddenly blared hundreds of voices at the same time. Despite the sudden pain he couldn't wipe the small of his face as he knew that only this could have meant that the Separatist's jamming them were no more.

Around him as they jogged through the temporary field camp set up in the middle of the tunnel others burst out into wild cheers as their radio silence was relieved. They looked at him and the seven other Spartans behind him and cheered even louder. For behind him and his team was a huge column of men and materials from the Spirit of Fire and the Svalbard all headed for the front lines.

He tuned his radio to Palmer's frequency. "Commander Palmer this is Castle Team on station with a lot of men anxious to fight. Where do you want us?"

He heard the noise of gunfire and blasters for a few seconds before she responded.

\_"I'm busy at the moment. Hold on."\_

Several seconds passed before she spoke again.

\_"Our extreme left flank is collapsing. Spartan Fireteam Rapier is the only group on station right now. Give them a hand will you? I'm marking their locations now. The General will deal with your reinforcements. Palmer out."\_

Several location markers blinked onto his HUD.

"All right, you heard the lady! Go go go!

They took off at a sprint towards their location towards the sound of battle. The UNSC had made some ground against the Separatist as evidenced by a lot of metal corpses on the ground but there were a fair amount of human ones too. With a tunnel as wide as this it wouldn't have been a stretch to say that it felt like a scene out of Earth's first world war.

They vaulted over a pile of twisted MTT's and caught sight of their target. Five Spartans in SPI Mk. III armor, the more advanced cousin of that which his six members of his team were wearing, were trying to hold the line against a large group of droids.

"Weapons free!" Will yelled as they vaulted over the wreckage and landed to the right of the beleaguered fire team. "Castle Team, shift fire left and assist!"

He jumped to the far right of them and lobbed a grenade clearing out four of them before ducking for cover. Asher to his right finished off his attackers. Ralph and Felix took advantage of some cover behind a dead Warthog and began lobbing high explosive shells from a pair of M319 Grenade Launchers. Further off to the left of them the rest of his team had taken up a comfortable position behind a pile of rubble and rock and began to pick off the enemy with precise fire.

The other Spartans were distracted for a moment by the sudden appearance of eight armor clad figures charging into battle along side them. Several cheers erupted from two of them but they quickly focused to the task at hand..

William flicked the safety off his weapon and fired a short burst into the head of a B2 before switching targets to a rolling destroyer droid. The destroyer ripped itself apart as its forward momentum, coupled with several large holes in its structure caused its integrity to fail.

He ducked as a missile from a launcher wielded by a B1 soared overhead and promptly eliminated that threat as well.

He changed positions and rolled next to one of Rapier's members.

"Spartan Will at your service. What's the situation?"

The Spartan glanced at him for a moment before gunning down a trio of B1's and dropping his current DMR for a fallen MA5.

Kevin-G097, Rapier Team Leader. You have my thanks Spartan. Things were getting bad down here. We're low on ammunition and these things just keep coming! We were being pushed up against the wall until you arrived." He jerked a thumb in the direction of the wall of the tunnel.

Will noted the age of the voice that accompanied the armor.

\_"Must be part of Gamma Company." \_he mused. \_"How young they are...\_\_\_How young we were.\_"  
><em>

He tossed him a few magazines which he deftly caught before reloading his rifle nodding thanks.

"The only thing we needed is more soldiers to push back the enemy line. I contacted Palmer but didn't think she would send us a Spartan Team."

"Well here we are."

Kevin nodded. "Do you have a Sniper on your team?"

"Sure we do. Why?"

"Our sniper, Emily is pinned down and can't move more than she can right now. With you here I was thinking we could send her down the line to provide better fire."

"That will be fine." he turned away for a second.

"Rapier Five."

"What?"

"Move yourself down the line and find a better position. We'll cover you."

The female Spartan grunted and jumped from her vantage point off the destroyed pelican and began running behind them over to where Ralph and Felix had taken up residence.

\_"Hey thanks for sending the lady here Castle Lead." \_Ralph joked.

"You know there's a reason we call her Valkyrie." Kevin said over his comm line to him.

\_"What's that?"\_

"She's merciless when she chooses who lives and dies. If you're not careful you'll end up with the bigger half."

\_"Is that the half that's saved?"\_

\_"Not even close. Go blow some of these freaks up and stop hitting on some way younger than you." \_Rapier's sniper interjected.

Will heard some stifled snorts of laughter from Rapier and he rolled his eyes as he watched Ralph's posture sink ever so slightly. Good, he needed humble men.

The droids had renewed another push and William found himself switching to shorter and smaller targets as they began to overwhelm the defense.

"What gun is that? Is it new?" Kevin asked curiously as he fired his scavenged MA5D at the encroaching droids.

"FNH FS-2000. 21st century technology that became the basis of yours." Will said pointing a finger at Kevin's rifle as he ejected a spent clip.

"Huh. You'll have to tell me how-"

His attention was diverted by two large objects rolling towards them suddenly. One of them opened up with its main cannon and a chunk of the pelican's wing was sent flying in an instant as it tore away.

"Heads up Rapier! Enemy armor closing fast! Find some cover." Kevin called out next to him. "Rapier Two, have any stickies left?"

\_"That's a negative!" \_another Spartan called out over the comms.

The tanks having announced their presence decided to act as artillery

support and started raining down fire over their heads. William watched Kevin sigh at the sight and debate on what his options were.

"Spartan? I can take care of that tank for you." Will said eying the vehicle as they crouched out of sight.

"What? No, I can't let you do that!" he spoke suddenly. "We don't have the weapons to take it on and you're all a bunch of...of..." he stopped. "What the heck even are you?"

"Tell your team to keep the tank distracted for the moment and I'll do likewise."

The Spartan stared back at him perplexed.

"What's your plan?"

William unclipped a fragmentation grenade from his belt and tossed it up and down once before rolling out of cover and firing a short burst from his rifle.

"Improvise."

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>Extract from the personal log of Spartan III Kevin G-097<strong>\_

"Improvise." the navy colored Spartan said as he disappeared from sight.

"Improvise? What the devil are you thinking?" I asked stunned. To go out into the middle of that field right now was a death wish, even for us.

\_ "Any ideas on who our friends are?" \_My demolitions expert Rapier Three spoke up as he joined right next to me."

"No clue other than that they're either extremely good, complete idiots or-"

\_-listening to you right now on an open channel."\_ Spartan Will said with a trace of humor. I mentally slapped myself over that one.

\_ "Castle Two, we're going to take out that tank, front and center now."\_

\_"Got it Will."\_ a female voice affirmed. That must have been Castle Two.

\_"Spartan Kevin, are you ready to assist?" \_

"Yeah." I grumbled still slightly embarrassed.

\_"Good. We move in 15 seconds. Take down as many targets as possible and help clear us a path. Since the rest of my team doesn't have their regular armor they'll stick back with you to assist."\_

"Roger that." I replied.



\_ "You're going to want to watch this." \_Castle Three spoke.

"Why's that?" I asked the other Spartan.

\_ "Because the Commander is going to put a show on for you." \_

I eased myself into a better position to see the advancing droids easier.

\_ "On my mark!" \_William called out.

\_ "Sync!" \_ Castle Two confirmed.

A seconds pause while the armor finished launching a salvo.

\_ "Go!" \_

Two blue blurs launched themselves over the makeshift barricade that had been created down the line. They came up from their jump with a roll and sprinted in tandem firing weapons. I felt myself lose focus of the enemy and instead on them. Castle Three hadn't been kidding, the two Spartans were blisteringly fast and almost creepily entirely in sync. When one ran out of bullets the other would leap over the other one and switch positions. They were leaping rolling, sliding, flipping, and moving so fast that the only way to tell that they had been there was a pile of scrap where a droid had once been.

\_ "Suppressing fire!" \_Castle Four ordered and six weapons opened up in an attempt to distract or hurt the enemy.

"Rapier! Assist Castle Team!" I ordered coming to my senses.

They obeyed and the droids were caught between two sets of foes. It was working, as stupid as their idea was, it was working. The droids seemed to panic facing fire from all of us at once and two charging Spartans. The tanks that had been raining fire farther behind our lines were starting to back up and decided now was the time to deal with them.

It was too late though for them though.

I felt a surge of giddiness as I watched the two suddenly split without words and run for the two different tanks. William mantled the first one in a jump that landed him on top of it. He scrambled upwards quickly and began to fire at the other one with his gun. The other turned distracted and fired at the first tank. With its back turned Castle Two mantled it in an instant and ripped open the hatch. The crew of the tank was tossed unceremoniously out in an instant. William jumped off his as it exploded from the damage sustained by unfriendly fire.

Castle Two was behind the wheel of the tank in an instant and after a few tenuous seconds of trial and error was \_driving \_the thing and using it against the droids. William mantled on top of Asher's tank and he began to snipe the droids.

"Come on!" I called out to my team. "We can't let them take all the

glory!"

We sprang out of our positions and began to follow them in earnest. Castle Team likewise leaped out of theirs and we began plowing at an angle into the Separatist lines like an arrowhead. The tank stopped and we all clambered on in earnest.

I looked back and smiled. A large pile of fresh scrap lay sparking on the ground.

"Nice work Spartan Kevin." Will said with a nod.

"Our pleasure."

"Did you like the movie?" Castle Three asked snarkily.

From underneath my helmet I turned red and looked away.

"Lock it down Hansu." Will silenced him at once.

"Geez...sorry Commander-"

"To \_KEVIN, \_not me."

Castle's sniper apologized at once and we just sat there for a moment while Asher blew up everything that came into range.

The droids suddenly started to push harder and faster on us almost coming at us with reckless abandon.

\_"This tank can't kill them all. Lend a hand will you?" \_Asher piped up from the cockpit.

The tank began to roll forward again while we fired at the droids. Sitting on top of armor tended to help one see the broader picture.

"Holy \*\*\*\*! This is awesome!" Rapier 3 called out enthusiastically as he lobbed yet \_another \_grenade into the enemy lines.

"Why can't we do stuff like this more?" Emily asked as she put a trio of rounds in the head of a Super Battle Droid.

"I have no clue. Where the heck is the rest of our army?" I asked as we continued to drive through the enemy.

It was then that the cavalry arrived in the form of an enormous fleet of Warthogs followed by Scorpions and a variety of tanks I had never seen before in my life (they looked like Scorpions on steroids). Despite the relatively little clearance they had the air was filled with the buzzing of Hornets as they soared overhead and opened up with cannons and missiles.

"That enough of an answer for you?" Micheal asked.

"Shut up." I said trying to conceal a grin.

From behind the tanks came a long line of Marines armored in long outdated armor.

"No way..." Rapier 5 whispered as the men jogged past and we were swallowed up by an advancing UNSC force.

A Warthog pulled up next to us and a Spartan clad in scout armor dismounted.

"Commander on deck!" Will shouted and we all stiffened up and dismounted the tank.

I recognized her as the one who had sent us to the left flank in the first place.

"At ease Spartans. You all deserve a well earned break. My appreciation is not easily won but today you have earned it." She turned towards Castle Team and eyed them.

"I know you have just woken up to be thrown into the middle of \*\*\*\* but welcome back to reality. I'm Sarah Palmer, commander of all Spartan Personnel and forces aboard the Infinity. The Captain was looking to speak with you but that will have to be arranged later."

"Why does he want us?" Will asked.

"That's for you to find out later. Fireteam Rapier. In light of your recent defense of our flank you have earned yourself a day's rest. I'll put in a good word to the Captain about you, but in the mean time we still have a lot of tin cans to crush between here and outside this forsaken mountain."

"Yes ma'am!" we chorused.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>General Obi-Wan Kenobi<strong>

\*\*Exterior of the Mountain,\*\*

\*\*11:16:04 Hours:\*\*

"Blast it Cody, where is that air support?"

"I don't know sir. General Windu was in charge of taking care of that. We can't commence bombing operations without the guns in his area taken down.

A sudden shadow roared overhead as the unmistakable bulk of two Venators settled overhead.

With a blistering barrage of lasers they suddenly blasted the field outside the mountain repeatedly throwing up an enormous cloud of dust and smoke.

"That did it! The droid line is breaking!" Commander Cody shouted as the smoke cleared and revealed a blackened expanse of nothingness. The only droids left were now \_in \_the mountain.

"Well that was easy. All units advance!" he ordered.

The AT-TE he was sitting on top of suddenly began to move forward as

his forces began to close in for the kill. He smiled that their luck today had begun to change. At least one thing was going right.

"Obi-Wan do you read me?" \_the voice of his former suddenly Padawan crackled through his com-link.

\_Make that two things.\_

"Anakin I'm here. I assume you took out whatever was jamming us?"

"Correct. I'm on a Gunship right now. We'll pick you up and then we can deal with these droids personally."\_

"I copy. Obi-Wan out."

The Gunship appeared a second later and Anakin and Ahsoka greeted him as he climbed aboard the LAAT leaving Cody to deal with the army.

"Had fun?" Obi-Wan asked eying a scratch that across Anakin's lower lip.

"Oh this? Some type of droid ambushed us in the woods. It wasn't like anything I've ever seen. I just embraced a tree more than I normally would. That's all."

"Weapons on the \*\*\*\* thing disintegrated whatever it touched." Rex scowled from an unseen corner with Fives and Echo."

"Disintegrated you say?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Turned em' into the ash within a few seconds. Nothing left at all." Echo grimaced.

"Hmm. Then we'll have to tell our men to stay clear of the trees. That's all."

"Uh, Generals? I think I can't proceed." \_Their pilot announced.

"Why?" asked Anakin slowly.

"Because the UNSC is blocking up my LZ."

"Land us outside." Obi-Wan ordered still skeptical

The doors opened and they stepped out to see an armored column sitting at rest with many men milling about lazily with a Separatist AAT at the front. 13 armored figures were sitting on it looking glad to be out of a fight.

"About time you showed up!" a Blue Spartan said in greeting casually. He stood up and came down to meet him.

"Are we all clear?" asked Obi-Wan surprised. He recognized two of the figures as the Spartans from Rhen Var.

"All clear. Just some clean up duty needed in the side

tunnels."

"And you did this all by yourselves?" Ahsoka asked.

"Of course not." he said pointing towards a large advancing column of infantry. "You did half the work yourself."

"And what of your Sangheili allies?"

"Taking care of stragglers. I do believe that my Superiors are seeking to meet with you." he said pointing to a Pelican that was descending towards them now.

It landed and the back opened up to reveal a very tired looking Admiral step out.

The Spartan had now been joined by the others and saluted as the Admiral stepped out.

"Greetings Master Jedi. Thank you for your assistance today. You saved a lot of lives and we can't thank you enough."

"The pleasure is ours. The Chancellor desires that we set up research and scientific outposts on this planet but we can leave that for later."

"Agreed. I think we all need a break for a little bit. I have important business for the Spartans here though. Give me a moment."

"What do you need Admiral?" the leader asked.

"I heard about your actions from Palmer today. In light of your recent leadership roles it is my duty to honor that. I have received authorization to reinstate your previous rank as Commander for showing excellent gallantry and bravery in the face of danger. Traits that are well needed for receiving this rank. And in addition your Team is to be transferred to the Infinity to serve in its Spartan compliment. All your belongings will be shipped over there shortly but you are to report ASAP for debriefing." he turned to an exclusively olive armored group of Spartans.

"Fireteam Rapier?"

"That's us." a male spoke up.

"You have also been requested to transfer from your current ship to the Infinity to serve in the ship's Spartan compliment. In addition we wish to award you all the Bronze star for your supporting actions in holding our flank up for so long. Congratulations. You are to report to the Infinity ASAP for debriefing. Good luck."

They all saluted and headed back to the tunnel.

"They are most impressive." Obi-Wan said as soon as they were out of earshot. "If only all our Clones showed this much devotion. I would not doubt the loyalty of our army, but it's one thing to have a soldier who is not genetically engineered to fight for you from birth do so with unwavering faith."

"I can only hope they are what you say they are Master Jedi. We need more men like them but the lengths to which we did so make me shudder. But another time, let's talk negotiations."

"Yes," Obi-Wan agreed. "Let's talk."

\* \* \*

><p><em>And thus concludes the first arc of this story! Will and team are re-united, the universes are more or less reacting the way the should be, the Republic and UNSCSwords of Sangheilios have joint military action, but we have yet to see Dean, Eric, or Zek Lhar. Wonder what could be happening to them? And what of the Absolute Record or the Spirit of Fire? The next chapter will naturally be a little bit of an unwind but not for long!\_

\_If you liked it leave a review! Comments, suggestions, and ideas are accepted. I ask now that you post them via a PM to prevent spam being posted in the reviews. \_

\_Many thanks to **\*\*gwb99\*\***, **\*\*Lord Razer\*\***, and **\*\*ARCCaptainFordo\*\*** for being wonderful betas.\_

Yours in writing,

**\*\*\_t.o.p.\_\*\***

## 17. Chapter 17

\_Hello hello! **\*\*theotherpianist\*\*** is declaring his break of hiatus over! I am back and ready with fresh ideas!\_

\_Like many authors of FanFiction, the horrible tragic monster of schooling has sucked up more time than I would like.\_

\_Seriously, like how many tests do you really expect a student to study, complete, and cry over in two months? My hiatus period is over and I'm happy to be back in the Halo x Star Wars Universe.\_

\_Before we begin this installment I must preface with a special thanks to **\*\*gwb99\*\***\_ \_for usage of Fireteam Rapier, however brief their involvement in this chapter will be. All other\_ \_characters are property of myself. \_

\_Please enjoy the show.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 17:<p>

**\*\*Pelican 3MZ,\*\***

**\*\*Planetary Orbit of Planet Cryptum, December 9th 2559: 10:18:04 Hours UNSC Standard Military Time/Calendar\*\***

**\*\*Spartan William Gunther\*\***

The Pelican rocked slightly as it flew through fringes of the planet's atmosphere.

"Are we all settled?" he asked to his team.

Seven Spartans in black standard issue bodysuits nodded.

"So tell me what's new?" Hansu said breaking the momentary silence. "We've been out for a while, have the squid-heads kept their promises to us? What major life-altering events have happened while we were on ice?"

"The Sangheili are in the middle of a civil war right now. The Arbiter's faction, the Swords of Sangheili, are entered into alliance with us. For the most part the Ungoy and the Lekgolo are our allies, the Kig-Yar structure of Government is failing to prevent widespread piracy and mercenary activity, and the Brutes have regressed. Some are allied with us but the majority are fighting amongst themselves right now. The biggest threat right now concerns the events of the Campaign on a Forerunner Shield World dubbed Requiem."

"What's that?"

"Forerunner shield world. Was the home of a single Forerunner preserved somehow with an army of armored servants known as the Prometheans. The Master Chief was found there and tried to warn Infinity away from the planet. In the process he awoke a Forerunner called the Didact. He disabled the Infinity and the Master Chief fought to regain possession of the ship. They drove the Didact away and Infinity left for Earth to report on their findings. Somehow the Didact located a missing weapon on Installation 03 and traveled to Earth. Navy did what they could but they were unable to stop him. He fired a weapon that digitized the entire population of New Phoenix. He was stopped by the Master Chief detonating a Havok class nuke on board and perhaps killing him. We don't know. At any rate we're still at war with the Prometheans and Storm."

"So what happened to Requiem?" asked Elizabeth.

"Six months later the Infinity went back to establish science operations. They discovered the planet was home to an artifact called the Janus Key. This artifact when brought to someplace called the Absolute Record is supposed to show the location of everything the Forerunners ever built, and it's located somewhere on this planet."

"You totally made that sound like the end of a ghost story or something." Brittany said after a second of reflection.

They chuckled and were interrupted by the Pilot calling them to attention and announcing they were arriving at their destination soon.

The Pelican touched the surface of a landing deck and the hatch opened.

The eight Spartans grabbed several large crates containing all their gear and pulled them out. Will stepped into the hangar and took in the sights. It was much like the Dauntless but...bigger. Everything was bigger, much bigger. They were in one of the small hangars towards the rear of the ship but it was still decent sized.

Groups of people were milling aimlessly about or running to and from assignments.

"Afternoon gentlemen." said a male voice.

They turned to see the yellow-gold avatar of a British WWII Aviator flash to life and salute.

"Welcome to the Infinity Spartan Team Castle. Someone will be by for your gear in a moment. For the moment please wait on the yellow and black line. Someone will be here for you shortly." he snapped to another salute and disappeared.

"That was...cryptic." Chelsea said.

"On the line." William said gesturing to a painted line that ran the length of the hangar.

They waited for only thirty seconds before William noticed a female Spartan heading their way.

"Castle Team, Commander on deck!"

They all crisply saluted.

Commander Sarah Palmer stared back at them again with stern and observant eyes.

"Well well, we meet again Castle. You have just transferred here correct?"

"Yes Commander." Will said.

"Fair enough. From now on Special Warfare Team Castle, while you are serving aboard the Infinity you are to be known as Fireteam Castle. On this ship we are all Spartans, all the same. The name Fireteam Castle was once held by six brave souls. You would do well to honor that name Spartans. I saw what you did on Requiem and I'll be honest, you've impressed me. That is not something easy to do. But please, don't let it go to your head."

She smiled just a bit.

"All right Fireteam Castle. Welcome aboard the Infinity. Your tour of duty begins here, we'll be running a four kilometer loop around the ship and to our final destination. While on our tour I will point out major points of interest. We start now."

With a twist of her body she started a fast jog to a corridor that ran the length of the ship.

Will nodded his head and the team began following behind closely.

They were indeed given a tour. Palmer was kind enough (or torturous according to some hushed whispers from Elizabeth and Felix) to tell them everything about the ship. There were indeed many things to pointed out. Some were useful, like the ships two large mess halls (apparently there was a third one for Spartans) or some of the ships



foundries, armories, the location of every infirmary in the ship, and the Quartermaster's workshop. Others were more geared towards testing the patience of Fireteam Castle as she pointed out occasional holes in the walls (the result of a Promethean attack on the Infinity) various maintenance closets, dorms of Marines, etc.

The tour got more interesting when they took an elevator down to the bottom of the ship (she was insistent they jog in place as well) and Palmer stopped them as they exited.

"You're going to want to remember this room." she said as the doors opened and they stepped out onto a catwalk that circled a series of eight domes below them. below them was another floor where there were windows all along the perimeter of the room. Looking down Will saw a large domed structure where it looked like a Firefight was going on.

"Welcome to the War Games room." She said with a degree of pride. "Here is where we are going to keep your combat skills sharp. No more using hangars and changing everything around."

"This is new." Chelsea said as she looked over the lip of the railing.

"Everything you see here was the result of Forerunner reverse engineering. Sophisticated software allows us to turn one of eight of these smaller rooms into larger rooms. We can also simulate almost everything including virtual enemies. However, we usually have our Spartan compliment fight against other Fireteams."

"Participation is mandatory?" Asher asked.

"That is correct." Palmer said approvingly.

William looked over again. Two Fireteams had just entered and were squaring against each other.

Who's in that one?"

"That would be Fireteam Crimson and Fireteam Majestic. Those two have a major rivalry going all the way back to our campaign on Requiem."

In a small room a Crimson and Blue colored team were moving into a bleak and empty room with the exception of two foldout walls on opposite ends covered with gear.

"Five on Four is slightly unfair don't you think?" Elizabeth asked as they all looked over to watch.

"Just wait and watch. You'd be better off watching below" Palmer said indicating a set of stairs that led to a lower level.

They followed her into a dark room below with a window taking up an entire wall giving allowing some light to filter through to them.

"Elimination!" a male announcer called out and the room suddenly changed as stone pillars began rising out of the ground.

The Spartans tensed and readied themselves. Three short beeps followed by a higher pitched one and they moved forward at once.

"Phyllis, Begin recording this session for review later."

"Recording session." A Female voice said over an intercom in the room.

"Who's that?" asked William.

"F.I.L.S.S is a computer system A.I. that was the brainchild of some part of an ONI program. Roland was being overwhelmed with coordination so ONI sent us a gift in the form of her and another Jeff, the male announcer you just heard, working the War Games system. Personally I find Roland a much better conversationalist than either of them. Jeff doesn't communicate that much and Phyllis will talk too much."

Palmer went over to a panel and flipped a switch. The lights in the room turned on and various screens burst to life with live images of what was going on in the room.

A Blue Spartan in soldier armor was the first to make contact with the enemy. He brought up his weapon and fired several bursts from his battle rifle. The shields flared on one of Crimson's Spartans but the Blue staggered and fell as one of the Crimson soldiers jumped on him and plunged a knife into him.

"Whoa!" Brittany exclaimed jumping to her feet. "Commander! He justâ€" "

Relax. It won't hurt him. All the weapons in here are simulation only. The knife didn't kill him but he'll feel a bruise from where he hit the ground.

"Casualty, DeMarco." Phyllis announced.

DeMarco suddenly vanished from where he lay only to reappear in a small box to watch the fight.

"He just re-spawned." Palmer said noting confusion. "If you "die" on the battlefield a teleportation grid will spawn you right into the action again. Hopefully you will have had made less mistakes and therefore not die again. We generally use TTR rounds and lockdown paint because teleportation doesn't simulate the importance of survival. If anything it encourages people to make mistakes." she said frowning at the two Fireteams.

Ninety seven seconds later Fireteam Majestic was immobilized and the computer was calling Crimson's victory.

"Like your teammate mentioned participation is mandatory. All inclusive war-games are usually Sundays but due to our deployment the schedule has been changed. We're having Spartan War Games tonight here. I'll expect you all there. Time to continue our tour."

William noted that they still had yet to see the bridge. His observations were proved correct when Palmer stopped them outside a set of doors several levels above.

"Look sharp people. Captain Lasky has been expecting you." she said before walking in.

Will followed and entered through another sliding door before entering a spacious room.

The bridge on this ship was the largest he had ever seen. It was spacious compared to those he had seen before on other ships. The Bridge was dominated in the middle by a large holotable and holoprojector displaying a current real time position of the Infinity around Cryptum. A large observation window dominated one end of the room where the floor slopped downwards to accommodate a couple crew stations. On either side of the holotable was another room filled with service members doing their jobs. Behind the holotable were additional stations raised slightly to provide visibility.

One man was hunched over the table talking to Roland. They stopped a respectable distance away while Palmer walked up to the man. She said something inaudible and he looked up.

"Fireteam Castle." Captain Lasky looked up and greeted them each with a handshake. "Welcome aboard the Infinity."

"We're glad to be onboard." Will replied.

"I've heard good things about your team. From what I was able to pull up and learn I believe you are in a position to help the other Spartans of Infinity realize the caliber of skill we expect from them. That is why I've brought you aboard. We are at war with an enemy that is as-if not more dangerous, than the Covenant. We need soldiers of your skill level on board." he gestured to Sarah. "It's time to prove that to us. Sarah?"

"Right then. Thank you Captain. I'll brief you on the results of tonight's War Games."

He saluted and they returned it and turned about to leave. From there it was another quarter mile before they reached their ultimate destination.

"-and here is where we stop." Palmer said as they entered a white room that extended on for some distance.

There were some whispers from the rest of Castle but Will was instead focused on the room.

It was a wide three tiered room with each tier progressively farther up and away from the previous one. A large walkway ran down the middle with elevators at regular intervals that would take personnel to the rapid deployment hangars.

"Welcome to the S-Deck Fireteam Castle. Below us is the Spartan's mess hall and further on is your quarters. I'll take you to your armor stations and I'll leave you be for the moment."

She led the way back through where they came from and to the right down a set of stairs. They entered out onto a long walkway with sets of ring like machinery and lockers extending to the end of the room. She led the way all the way down until they were near the door before

stopping.

"These eight machines are configured to help you get into your armor quickly, safely, and efficiently. They are to only be used with the help of trained personnel, and armor is not to leave anywhere but here. You will be issued the titanium composite inner layer to your armor suit which you may wear daily. Understood?"

"Yes ma'am!"

"Good. Lasky informed me that five of you are in need of new suits correct?"

"Yes ma'am!" Five voices chorused at once.

"You're in luck. We picked up a shipment of MJOLNIR before we left on deployment. There should be enough to fit you adequately and give you all a choice. For the moment you will be issued standard Recruit armor before we assign you anything more specialized. You are allowed some customization with colors but all of it must fall under regulation. Your standard team colors are for the moment pre-determined to be light blue on dark blue unless otherwise requested by your Commander. All armor color is to follow UNSC regulation."

She turned and pointed a finger towards the wall.

"Your rooms are over there, dinner is in two hours, and we have War Games in three. Be there\_ on time.\_"

They were interrupted by the voices of a couple Spartans who were in armor walking slowly back. One of them had said something funny and the rest of the team was laughing boisterously.

"Hey Majestic! We got visitors!" a blonde male said as he caught sight of them.

"Shut up Madsen." a redheaded woman scowled at him.

Another male Spartan walked up to them.

"Well hello there. You guys are obviously new here." he stepped forward and offered a hand to William.

"I'm Paul DeMarco, leader of Fireteam Majestic."

"William Gunther. Fireteam Castle, pleased to meet you."

"Castle eh? Used to be another group on here named Castle. They were good men though. Still, glad you to have you on board."

His attention was diverted for a fraction of a second by Brittany putting a few stray hairs back into place.

"And who might you be?"

She flushed and froze for a moment.

"Uhhh...Brittany...pleased to meet you."

Palmer cleared her throat rather loudly.

"DeMarco I would worry about your match against Crimson today more than meeting the new people on board. There is after all another group of Spartans coming on board this ship."

The other Spartans of Majestic gave several chuckles at her remark but an eyebrow from DeMarco quieted them.

"Commander, we beat Crimson the second and third rounds though." the redhead interjected after a moment.

"I didn't question you beating them. You and Crimson are our best. Until others prove it to me it will remain that way."

Will swore that he saw Palmer stare at his team as she said that remark.

"One more thing Castle One. We may be equal in rank but I command our Spartans. Until Lasky removes me from duty or I happen to die you are under my supervision."

"Understood Commander." He nodded in understanding.

"Go unpack. I have a few more words for Majestic."

They turned away and proceeded through the doorway.

Through the door they came to a large common room that was followed by a large hallway filled with rooms with the Fireteam name and symbol etched into the walls and doors. The rooms appeared to be octagonal. And jutted out into the walls at regular intervals. Tables, chairs, and desks were sit into the natural alcoves.

"Here we are." William said as they approached two rooms emblazoned with a black castle.

He opened one and proceeded inside.

The room was octagonal with another common room in the middle. A table for four dominated the middle. This could be put into the floor via two two doors that opened in the floor. To his right was a storage unit for his team while to his left was a set of four cryo pods. A door straight ahead led into a small rec room with a couple couches and a small holo seen projector.

It had obviously been a party room some time ago. Everything looked heavily used and almost broken. Most interesting were the variety of divets, dents, and stains on the wall.

"I vote we change up the decor." Elizabeth's lip curled as she observed it.

"Agreed. This place is a mess."

"At least the other rooms aren't." Brittany pointed out.

The doors she was gesturing to outside led to two rooms that were identical bedrooms. They each had two beds (with an extra cot for a third person in a closet.) Two bunk beds set into the wall lay

freshly made. Desks lay adjacent to them. On the opposite wall of the beds were two bathrooms that connected with the room next to them.

Exiting back into the common room they were interested in finding that running through their room was a corridor that directly connected their dorms to the others through a set of doors. Will ordered them to open up the door on the other side turning a four person room into an eight person room.

"Asher you take the women on the right and I'll take the guys on the left." William ordered as they finished exploring.

He opened up their storage unit to see all their articles in one place, albeit haphazardly placed. He grabbed a big duffel bag and brought it into his room.

"I got the bottom." He announced as Hansu entered the room with him.

He shrugged and climbed up top taking his stuff with him. Will hunched over and started unpacking his clothing when a knock on the door distracted him.

He got up slightly wearied and walked over to the door and opened it.

"Good afternoon." a man in a white lab coat said crisply

"I have to speak with you about your team's armor. The sets are all awaiting you when you armor up. Diagnostics show that your old armor is fully functional. However, the standard for our operatives is the Generation II MJOLNIR line of armor and per protocol we are requisitioning your other armor for storage. Should you so desire you may still use it but we advise you to try out the new sets and become comfortable with them. Please have your team read these and wear these bodysuits."

With that he deposited a thick stack of user manuals into his arms and turned away.

William shut the door and turned back.

"Who wants required reading material?" he called out.

One by one the rest of them came to see what he was taking about.

"Manuals?" Elizabeth grumbled.

"Sweet. Time to see if this is as good as they claim it to be." Felix chorused picking up his manual with an attentive eye.

"If we're participating tonight I doubt we'll get time to test everything out thoroughly. Read through quickly."

A knock on their back door interrupted them.

"I got it." Elizabeth said going and unlocking it.

The door swung open to reveal five Spartan IV's gathered loosely behind the door.

"Hi there." said Paul DeMarco as he entered through the threshold. "We didn't get to fully introduce ourselves and show some more hospitality. So we brought you this."

The largest Spartan in the group pushed through carrying a large crate of what had to be alcohol.

"Best stuff there is."

"Wow!" Chelsea exclaimed as she took a hold of it.

"Alt Burgundy? Seriously?! Where the \*\*\*\* did you get a hold of this?" Ralph interrogated as he opened one of the boxes and removed a shiny green bottle with tender care.

"We found it on an OP in Rio. Guy was hoarding the stuff by the ton so naturally we took our fair share. This here fetches a hefty price on the market should you choose to sell it as well." DeMarco grinned. "Consider it our welcome gift to the Infinity."

Will and the others nodded their thanks.

"I didn't catch your names." He said staring at the eight Spartans. "I know that you're William, and you're Chelsea from Coruscant. But who are you?"

"Asher Bretzing." His Lieutenant Commander stepped forward and offered a hand.

"Hansu Chen." He stepped forward.

"Elizabeth Whitley."

"Ralph"

"and Felix"

"Brittany."

The largest Spartan on the other side of the door stepped forward.

"Carlo Hoya. Pleased to meet you all."

"I'm Tedra Grant." An Irish woman stepped forward and offered her hand.

"Anthony Madsen." A confident blonde male said.

"And I'm Gabriel Thorne." Said the last individual.

"Pleased to meet you Fireteam Majestic." Will said.

"Do you happen to know the kids that are bunking adjacent to us?"

"Kids?" Asher blankly asked.

"Five kids showed up in the room next to you. No idea who they are."

"I think you'd be interested to know that the members of Fireteam Rapier are Spartans."

DeMarco choked for a second.

"Seriously?" Madsen laughed clearly not believing them.

"Fireteam Rapier is part of the last class of Spartan III soldiers. We were part of the proceeding graduating class." William said gesturing to the others.

"Uh huh. I ain't buying it." Hoya said in laughing disbelief.

"You guys are Spartan III's?"

"We'll prove it tonight in the War Games." Asher spoke up suddenly looking DeMarco in the eye.

"Oh snap." said Hoya breaking out into fresh laughter as DeMarco stared back trying to digest her challenge.

"Come on Paul, you can't back down now!" Tedra said edging him on.

"Shut up Tedra." Paul grimaced. "You just want to see my \*\*\* planted on the floor." he turned back to Asher.

"Well?" she inquired.

He stared back for a moment and placed his hands on his hips.

"If you win you can have part of the Observation Deck to yourselves. We won that right a week ago in a match against Crimson but I'll put it on the line. Only 30 minutes though, then it opens up to everyone else. I don't have any money to give you cause I lost my betting pool against Fireteam Switchback yesterday so that will have to suffice. Fair enough?"

Asher looked at William who nodded.

"Deal."

There were some cheers from both sides and DeMarco stepped forward again.

"You know, I think we're going to get along just fine. Just be careful about the other Fireteams though. Crimson bunks from across us and Fireteam Eclipse and Talon are adjacent to them. Take my word for it, you do not want to \*\*\*\* off any of the guys on Eclipse or Talon."

"How come?" Brittany asked.

"Later." said Paul. "Dinner starts soon and I do not want to be stuck in the back of the line again, especially when its taco night."



The five members of Majestic turned and started heading out to the lunchroom.

"By all means sit with us tonight. We don't want you guys to be totally alone tonight." said Thorne turning around before heading off to join his team.

Will watched the door close.

"Elizabeth, go hide the wine somewhere where we're not going to demolish all of it in one night."

"Got it." she said hoisting the boxes in her arms and going off to her room.

"So now that they mentioned it what do you think about the other III's Will?" asked Chelsea when she had returned.

He paused and thought for a moment.

"Hmm. I don't know yet. What do you think about them?"

"Them?" Chelsea cocked her head to the side. "They seem...off, if you know what I mean."

"Like just in general?" Hansu asked. "For where they are, they're pretty \*\*\*\* good for their age. I'd even bet they're probably better than we were at that age."

"Oh man Hansu. You're bringing back memories of Onyx and Mendez." Ralph grinned.

"I think I'll wait to pass judgment on them. As long as they can do their job like they've been trained then I see no problems here. I think the only thing I'm seeing is a lack of experience in the field. We've been in active duty for what...more than ten years now?"

"14." Asher replied.

"\*\*\*\*." Felix muttered.

"Language guys." grumbled William. "Other than that I think they'll be fine. Its the IV's I worry about."

"Are we making a judgment just off of one Fireteam?" Brittany asked.

"Doesn't seem a little fair."

"No. I'm not passing judgment on all of them quite yet. Some of them are closer to us like Tedra and Thorne but the other three? Even Commander Palmer to some small extent, they're arrogant and overconfident."

"True, I mean they're not as professional as us but I mean yeah we can be casual and loose out of combat but these Spartans take that to a whole new level." Elizabeth added.

"Come on, let's give them a chance." Brittany said. "Judgments can

wait. Food can not."

"Amen sister." Chelsea agreed emphatically.

"Fine. Let's go eat." Will said unwilling to continue the conversation.

Chelsea and Elizabeth traded high fives briefly and the rest of the group went to prep everything for dinner.

When they were all assembled and in fatigues Will led them out into the hallway and they began to retrace their steps.

They ran into several groups of Spartans wandering in the same direction. They waved but said nothing more as they conversed among themselves.

"You would think they would notice new people." Ralph observed as they lapped another group.

"Give it time." Chelsea said.

"I wonder how many gals there are aboard." Felix mused trailing behind Chelsea.

Asher raised an eyebrow at his comment.

"I'm wondering the same thing. You can't tell me you have all these Spartans on board and not have a few women be among them." Hansu grinned.

Brittany and Elizabeth both traded aggravated glances.

"Don't forget they're not just women. They're \_Spartan\_ women. They don't just look good, they perform just as-"

Brittany slugged Felix's shoulder angrily.

"Ow-heh! What the \*\*\*\*?! Britt!"

"Language Felix!" William called out.

He heard something unintelligible from Felix but decided to drop it. At this point they were now walking past the armor assembly area with its rows of circular machines and lockers. They exited through the door on the far end descended a set of stairs to their right.

They emerged through and came to another short corridor lined with twenty Spartans all standing hungrily waiting for food.

Ralph, Hansu, and Elizabeth all let out groans as they saw the line.

"Not now." Chelsea said. "Let's make our first impressions be somewhat decent."

The line moved forward and with a flash of bright fluorescent light they entered into the mess hall.

It was a well-lit space with rows upon rows of tables and chairs for

eating, all reinforced to bear the weight of the genetically modified super soldiers. There was a stair case in the center that led to an upper floor that overlooked the main level and descended to a lower floor as well with a plexiglas railing running around it that a couple groups were leaning on as they talked.

The line curved against the left wall.

Set far back against the wall underneath the top level was a bar with a long granite countertop that was filled with people. To the right of that was an open door leading to the kitchen where men and women were carrying finished plates and trays. To the right of that was a long line of buffet style tables where a variety of food was being offered and taken. Further off the line there was a salad bar, pizzeria, grill, and sub-station, and a very crowded dessert bar.

Will watched a Spartan receive some food and proceed to a row of computers at the end of the station where he produced a sleek silver gray card and scan it. He moved on and was followed by another male who did the same thing.

"Were we supposed to get those?" Asher asked as she observed the line as well.

"What?" asked Brittany confused.

"The cards they have."

"Oh. I don't know."

A male Spartan ahead of them turned around.

"You guys don't have cards?"

"Yeah, what are they for?" Will asked.

"Doctors onboard insist that we eat a balanced diet. Our meals are individually tailored so that every Spartan gets the \_exact\_ amount of calories they need." He turned and looked all of them over.

"You're new aren't you."

"Indeed we are." Ralph answered.

"Cool. Horatio Fry, Fireteam Shadow."

"William Gunther, Fireteam Castle."

"You guys are the replacements huh?"

Will looked at him confused. Before he could interrupt he was interrupted by a tap on the shoulder.

A short doctor in an impeccable white labcoat was staring at him.

"Spartans? I have your nutrition cards here. You will need to scan these every-

"I got it Doc. Explained the whole thing to them."

"Oh. Well." The doctor looked slightly confused on what to do next.  
"If that's the case then I'll leave."

He deposited eight cards in Will's hand and Will passed them out while Horatio turned to them again.

"So. How long you guys been Spartans?"

"14 years." Asher replied.

Horatio's face changed to perplexed.

"14? But the Spartan Program is only-"

His face changed again.

"Wait, are you guys Spartan II's?"

"Not quite. Will replied after a moment.

"Three's a crowd?"

"Bingo." Ralph nodded.

"Woah. That's a wow. Three's? Like conscripts from Orphanages?"

"Uhh, not quite." Will said hesitantly. "It's still classified...ish."

"Some of us are Orphans." Elizabeth grimaced.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Horatio awkwardly mumbled as he tried to think of what to say.

"Hey Horatio!" someone called out.

"They turned to see a group of three men walking towards them."

"Hey what?"

"Remember that bet you made when we said that you'd be late again when-"

"Oh shut up man. Come on, give me a little slack. I was being nice to some new faces. I'll pay up tonight after the War Games."

Will didn't follow the conversation after that. Instead he focused on the faces of the men standing now across from Horatio.

There were three of them standing there, one was of Hispanic descent, the one next to him was a tanned and muscular brute that towered over everyone else. He was at least seven feet and had enormous muscles. He was built like a Scorpion and Will knew that he was looking at a brute. His face was hardened and cold and he observed everything around him with an air of contempt. He had no reason to do so but he instantly felt a surge of dislike and hate towards him. Confused he

forced those feelings away and turned his attention to the next man.

The next Spartan was the one that intrigued him the most. He was slightly shorter than him and long blonde hair cropped to one side with a nasty looking scar across his face and amber eyes that were shockingly intense. They both locked eyes for a second and stared at each other confused.

A moment later the other man continued as if nothing had ever happened.

Will racked his brain. He knew him. There was a definite part of him that knew him.

"Trade places." Will said shifting Ralph who was still four inches smaller than Shadow's brute into his place so he could stand next to Asher.

"What is it?" she asked as he walked up next to her.

He caught her arm and escorted her a few paces back to the end of the line.

"Does he remind you of anybody?" he asked.

"Which one?"

"The blonde and the tank."

She stared at them both for a second.

"No?" she said after a moment.

"I know him for somewhere. I'm telling you."

"Will, he probably just looks similar. We're what, trillions of miles away from Earth." It couldn't be anybody we know."

Still unconvinced he shrugged and let the matter drop.

"So you guys ready for the War Games?" Horatio asked striking up conversation again.

"Heck yeah! The males chorused confidently. Will just shook his head and chuckled to himself at the enthusiasm his male comrades still had. Being a soldier hadn't quite burned it out yet.

"Good. Just a heads up though. Palmer usually does something special for the new teams we get. Be on your guard."

"What type of new thing?" Hansu asked.

"Well in years past we had King of the Hill matches where you could only use Rockets, Palmer's given them extra shield strength, slower mobility, no HUD, knives to a gunfight, always something that's a little out of the ordinary as a 'initiation' of sorts.

"Ouch." Chelsea winced as he named different in ways in which Palmer had unbalanced the playing field.

"Yeah. Palmer can be a pain but we need something like this. Combat is never truly fair and it's a good teaching tool."

"We'll be ready then." Will said.

The brute spoke for the first time in a low deep voice.

"Ha. You act like children. Don't you understand that you can never be ready? Take your arrogance elsewhere."

Will shot out a hand behind him as Ralph and Hansu almost jumped upon the man.

"Hey! cool it Issac!" Horatio interrupted the brute. "Daniel, Bjorn, you three head back and prep yourselves for tonight."

Issac grunted and turned away flanked by the other two men.

"Excuse him." Horatio muttered apologetically.

"I don't know about you but I'm hungry." Elizabeth said deflating the tension as they came up to the line.

Horatio bid them farewell and he left the group as they went to collect their food. They were indeed the last ones in line as they took tortillas and loaded them with toppings.

"These actually look and feel like tortillas." Will commented as he accepted two large ones from a young server behind the counter.

"That's 'cause they are! We got them a week ago, these have just been sitting chilled. You won't find too many ships that will give you food like this! Often we just give you MRI's for days on end but the Captain's feelin' extra generous tonight." the server chimed in.

"I'm not complaining." Ralph laughed as he applied an enormous amount of guacamole to his overloaded tortilla.

"Aw \*\*\*\* man. You guys are new aren't you." he said as he looked at them.

"Uh huh! But I love it here already!" Elizabeth bobbed up and down.

The Marine who was serving them was slightly taken aback with her enthusiasm but continued.

"Uhh..okay. Well, uhhh, do you know what we also do here on the Infinity?"

"What?" asked Hansu.

"Food competitions." he said mischievously.

"Seriously?" asked Chelsea.

"Mmmhmm. We have a 'Master Chef' on board who's into this type of

thing. I'm friends with the guy. Name's Jonathan Lowell, the most temperamental man ever but he does wonders in the kitchen. He's like Gordon Ramsey but fatter and he's actually pleasant most of the time.

"Gordon who?" Will asked.

"Aww nevermind. That \*\*\*\*s ancient, you wouldn't know him."

"Point made. Continue please."

"Okay. So I guess the biggest event we've had was when Infinity completed her tour on Requiem. We had possibly \_the best\_ Chili cookoff. Ever."

Noting the skeptical look on Will's face he added, "You'd be surprised at how many amateur chefs we have on board."

"How hard of a competition?"

"Well the heads of everything on board are your Judges. Its randomly chosen leadership but the Captain's always a part of it, not too much of a hard crowd. But man, that was a lot of food."

"Who won?" Asher asked.

"Well each Branch had their own winners but for you guys it was Fireteam Forrest. You'll meet them later I guess. They put the winners in the final round and my squad won."

"Nice." Chelsea nodded approvingly.

"What's the next event?" Brittany asked, curiosity perked.

"Well its hard to say. We haven't gotten an updated list of R&R activities yet since we came here but we always do something the week before Christmas."

A balding man suddenly emerged from the kitchen and roared for a 'Jenkins'.

The server paled suddenly and cast a nervous glance over his shoulder.

"\*\*\*\*. Sorry, I gotta go. Good luck tonight."

'Jenkins' then dashed away and disappeared to be replace by someone else.

Will walked up to computer.

An robotic voice ordered him to place it on a scanner and scan his card. He did so and his tray was scanned in a burst of red light.

\_"Scan completed. Food levels within boundaries. Please scan your card and have a nice day."\_

"Charming." he replied making a face at it to which his team laughed as he scanned his card and stepped back.

He waited for the rest of his team patiently while they went through the process smoothly until they got to Ralph.

"But I don't want to give it up!" Ralph whined as the robot/dietician ordered him to return half of his second burrito to a trashcan that popped out of the base.

"Just do it and come on!" Hansu groaned impatiently as the rest of the team laughed at the demo experts debacle.

He finally gave it up to the trashcan and the computer chirped at him to have a lovely day.

"So where are we sitting?" Brittany asked as they all rejoined.

Will scanned the room looking around.

"There. There's a spot by Majestic if you want."

"Uhh. I'm okay." Brittany said nervously.

"Huh?" Chelsea asked turning to face her.

"Let's go sit over-"

"Over where? Majestic has saved us a few seats." Asher pointed with a finger to a table near the edge of the staircase leading down.

"There's no where else Britt." Felix added.

"Stop calling me Britt!" she protested.

"Wait." said Hansu with a sudden glint in his eye. "You think one of them is attractive don't you." he said triumphantly.

"What?!" she spluttered turning red instantly.

Castle let out a collective Ohh! as her face gave her all the confirmation they needed.

"DeMarco?" asked Elizabeth.

"Ewww no!" she said disgusted regaining some of her color. "Total player. No."

"What about Madsen?" Elizabeth tried again.

"No..."

"Is it Thorne?" Will said after a moment smiling.

She looked down instantly turning red again and trying to hide a smile.

Ralph and Felix whooped as she nodded slowly.

"Calm down guys." Will said trying to withhold a smile as they celebrated. "Brittany you can sit farthest away if that makes you



feel better."

"Thanks..."

They walked over with food in hand over to where they were sitting.

"Hey!" Madsen greeted them loudly as they walked over.

" 'bout time you show up." DeMarco added as well. "We were wondering if you got lost."

"No. We just met Fireteam Shadow and one of the servers."

"Fireteam Shadow's not one to mess around with." Hoya said warningly. "Horatio and Bjorn are the most likeable by far. Issac though, \*\*\*\*, he's a menace on the battlefield. He prefers to use his hands instead of any weapons with pretty bloody results."

"Daniel is more of a maniacal genius. He likes using strategies of fear against his enemies and he's also a brilliant strategist. Just when you think you're one step ahead of him you realize too late that you've been played."

"He's...unorthodox." Tedra added as she sipped a glass of lemonade.

"Remember the fusion coils?" Thorne asked.

Majestic let out a collective groan.

"Why'd you have to bring that up?" Hoya shook his head.

"What happened?" Asher asked.

DeMarco shook his hand.

"No no no. Too embarrassing. Later."

The table fell silent for a few seconds until Thorne perked up.

"You guys are III's right?"

"Yeah?" Will responded after a moment. "Why?"

"What was it like? I mean are you allowed to tell us?" Thorne asked.

"Well I mean stuff is still classified but I can tell you it was hard. I've heard that the II's were trained harder. If that's the case the life really sucked for them."

"Where did you guys fight?"

"You guys familiar with Fumirole?"

"Yeah. I had a brother who lost an arm there." Madsen admitted after a moment. \*\*\*\*, I...I don't even know where he is right now. He was sent back home to receive a prosthetic and I...well, I lost track of him after that.

"My dad served on Fumirole. He and my uncle both. My uncle died the day we won. I'm still shocked that the Covies even left it alone after they were defeated.

"Wasn't like Harvest."

"All right so you guys served on Fumirole. Where else?"

"Uh. Sargasso, New Llanelli,"

"Born there." Madsen interjected. "Sorry..."

"I'm sorry. We were there for Skopje."

DeMarco and Hoya both whistled.

"That entire battle was a massacre." Hansu said. "Covies were smart and targeted the spaceports first. No way to get any civilians off the planet."

"Is it true that civilians turned and tried rushing the Navy ships?" Tedra asked.

"Yeah." Chelsea said sadly. "Once they figured out that the only way off was on our ships they tried attacking our \*\*\*\* men when they realized they were stuck. We had to fire in self defense...it was-"

"-a tragedy." Will finished. "After that we were at Paris IV, Concord, and Meridian."

"Just the eight of you?"

Will's face hardened.

"No. We were under Special Warfare Group Three like NOBLE Team on Reach. We were a 23 man unit."

"Were?" asked Carlo looking at the group.

"We lost five on Reach." Will said trying to keep his voice casual and conversational. "They were still just adolescents..." he sighed. "I think we can all agree Reach is still pretty fresh." he pointed a finger to Asher. "Her unit was almost completely KIA. After we escaped we had her transferred to our team. It wasn't that much of a stretch because she was still in a SWG team. "I'm sorry. I don't like to talk about Reach that much." he apologized. "Everybody else was KIA in an operation against the Covenant."

Majestic nodded in understanding and let the matter sit. Madsen was staring off into space though with a thoughtful expression.

"Something on your mind Madsen?" Asher asked.

He blushed slightly.

"Uh yeah actually. If you wouldn't mind me asking...did you serve on Noble Team?"

She sat expressionless for a second but flicked a quick expression at Will.

"Do I tell him?" \_she asked behind those green eyes.

"You decide." \_he shrugged imperceptibly.

"Yeah. I am...or was Noble Six."

The table immediately became fixated on her.

"\_The \_Noble Six?" asked Tedra trying to clarify?

"Who's-?"

"Shut up Hoya." she said getting excited. "You're rumored to have the 11th highest kill count of any Spartan, saved hundreds in the siege of New Alexandria, helped take out a Supercarrier with an improvised bomb, and you've made entire Innies groups vanish all within a period of a year and a half."

Asher became suddenly interested in her food, twiddling a forkful of rice around.

Tedra tried again thinking that she didn't hear. Asher looked up though her face unreadable.

"Some of that I have no idea how you got your hands on. Between me and you though I hated being Colonel Ackerson's personal hitman, never showed an iota of care for what \_I wanted \_or how I felt about anything." she lamented bitterly.

Noting their confused faces she continued.

"I may have the 11th highest kill count of any Spartan but let me be the first to say I hate the act of killing itself. Yeah, you heard me. There's something wrong about killing a living creature with a mind and will of its own that just...feels wrong, especially when its another human."

DeMarco opened his mouth to counter but Asher ignored him.

"I have a talent yes, I understand that more than I would like to. However I would prefer to keep that talent as unused as possible."

"Fair enough." Thorne replied trying to switch the conversation.

"Hey guys. We only have a few minutes." DeMarco warned noticing a clock overhead.

"But I just got my food!" Ralph said indignantly stuffing half a burrito in his mouth immediately after he spoke.

"Palmer hates people that are late. Best not to get on her bad side early." Thorne added to which Paul nodded.

"We'll catch you later." Madsen said. "Nice to meet you all

again."

They left quickly after that and Will tried to enjoy the food as much as possible while hurrying to finish and leave. Majestic was soon swallowed up in a growing crowd of Spartans.

"Done." Will announced as he polished off the last mixture of guacamole and salsa left over from his food with a single chip.

Without any further words Castle stood up and moved quickly back to their rooms. Five minutes later saw them all back in their rooms getting ready with little time to spare. When he unpacked the bodysuit he gave it a few minutes of inspection before trying it on. The bodysuit was made of a nonrigid titanium-based material, making it very strong and yet very flexible. The suit, according to the manual had numerous functions, small but vital to the safety and survival of the wearer. It also served as another layer of protection against ballistics attacks and was coated with a heat-resistant material to disperse heat from plasma weaponry.

Putting it on wasn't too much of an issue and he was amazed at how light and flexible it was compared to the bodysuit he had with his Generation One armor. It was almost another suit of armor in and of itself. Fancy.

"We're cutting it close!" he warned as he stopped admiring it and finished adjusting the suit to where it was comfortable.

"It's not my fault I put this on backwards!" Felix complained from inside the bathroom.

"We're ready Castle One!" Asher yelled from the common room.

"Take the women then and start making your way down." he said exasperated as Hansu finally emerged from his hiding place fully ready with Ralph.

Felix staggered around the corner a moment later.

"Got it!" he panted heavily.

He just sighed and led them out the door.

"Come on, double time it all of you." he said spurring them on.

They broke out into a run and made it to the armor bay in record time. It was filled with Spartans milling around in small and large groups all glad in the same bodysuit. Most of the suits interestingly had patches of color splashed about. They had little time to relax though as they formed up next to the armor area assigned to them when the lights dimmed suddenly.

"Ladies...and other Spartans, welcome to tonight's annual War Games match." said an amplified and enlarged video image of Sarah Palmer that projected itself on several walls.

"The Captain and I wish to commend you all on your action today on Cryptum. You all performed admirably and have our thanks. That being said our training never stops."

William caught sight of her on the far end near the door leading out to the mess hall. She was standing on an elevated observation area with a spotlight trained on her.

"Tonight it is my pleasure to introduce to us some new blood."

A loud chorus of whoops and cheers met this announcement as many of the Spartans looked around.

"You know the drill." she continued.

Several spotlights flashed to life blinding Will. He was standing in the middle of one of them. Closer to Palmer another set flashed to life and illuminated Fireteam Rapier standing nervously looking out of place.

"Poor kids." Chelsea whispered.

Will felt the eyes of all upon him and his group. \_What exactly did she have in mind for tonight?\_

"Please welcome Fireteam Castle and Fireteam Rapier."

Applause broke out but Will didn't know whether to believe it to be genuine or not.

"Fireteams Castle and Rapier have an outstanding record, let's see if that's true. Tonight it's every man and woman against these two teams. Your job is to survive as long as possible."

Will blanked.

"What?!" hissed Hansu and Brittany simultaneously.

"Oh no..." Chelsea groaned.

Will despite himself, began to smile and laugh quietly.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Brief extract from the Journal Spartan Kevin-G097<strong>

My team and I froze as the spotlight shined down upon us and Palmer delivered upon us our "death sentence". The spotlight was still adding to our discomfort because we were not in anyway social people, conforming to the 'loner' group more than anything else. There were now a fair number of eyes on us, some of their owners were grinning or smirking and one of the men was cracking his knuckles in an attempt to scare us.

We were not impressed with their antics or Palmer's plans for us.

Michael was staring Commander Palmer straight in the face, as if daring her to come down here and take us herself. Julianne was shifting her feet, unsure what to do. Sophie was staring at the other team, Castle. They like us were in a similar position. Emil's face and body were one of complete calm and tranquility, a snipers gift,

she had told me once.

"Numbers?" I asked as Palmer began lecturing to us on why this was supposed to help us.

"Us or them?" Julianne replied.

"Them. Who else?"

"Well last I checked this boat carries almost 350 SIV's. If we split up then that's roughly still 175 or so for us and 175 for Castle. Why? whatya thinking?"

"We hide, let them come and wait for them to pass, then we jump them." Michael ever the brawler appeared to protest but I continued before he could speak. "We can't win in a straight up fight so we've got to play dirty."

"Meaning?" Sophie asked.

"Meaning we rig our position with explosives, IV's come in and try to kill us while we're a safe distance away, then boom." I said.

"Julianne how long can we stay hidden with invisibility? What's the timer?"

"Around thirty seconds if we move, a little longer than that if we're still...I like where this is going, boss."

"Hey, what if they can somehow disable camouflage?" Emily asked.

"What? Of course they can't. We kept our SPI armor remember?" I said dismissing her fears. "We also get a ten minutes head start according to what I heard that guy Dalton say." I said as I looked past the throng of Spartans at our competition. Specifically their team leader. William's face was unreadable except for the trace of a smile. Otherwise he was stoic and looked like a Spartan in every fashion.

"The only thing that worries me is how they have a three person advantage over us." Julianne said hesitantly.

"Numbers are not the key here." I replied.

"But if it comes to surviving the longest don't you think they have the advantage?"

"Not necessarily. It's easier to hide five than eight."

"And if we can hide out for longer?"

"Castle will have to be bait for this to work. We can make them the bait right?" Sophie interjected, piping up. I nodded. "Do we tell them?"

"Nah. That takes the fun out of it!" Michael replied excitedly.

"You are something else, Michael." Emily muttered.

"I know, and you love me for it."

"Shut up."

"Answering Sophie's question." I stated flatly. "No. We're trying to win here. Why would we want to help them?"

With our conversation dead for the moment, Palmer's voice interrupted us again.

"In a real firefight you can often be the last man standing for extended periods of time. This is designed to test how well you work as a team against overwhelming odds."

I swore she smirked at us.

"What an \*\*\*hole." Emily muttered. She had let her feelings about the Spartan IV's be well known to the entire team, she especially disliked the arrogant attitude their officers and team leaders, like Palmer, displayed.

"And just because I'm nice I'll separate Rapier and Castle. You will all be on the same board but you are to stay in the general location of where you are assigned for the first ten minutes. All new Spartans are to report to the armory for weaponry and then to the War Games room at once. You will have a ten minute headstart once you enter. Good luck.

She turned around and exited and the lights came back on.

"Don't let her catch you saying that kid." one of the Spartans next to us called out.

Emily's face angrily flushed but I stretched out a hand.

"Come on guys. We prove ourselves tonight and nobody will be callin' us kids anymore." I said. "And with any luck we'll even beat out Castle."

\* \* \*

><p><em>And there you have it. One more chapter completed. Thanks for your chapter will see War Games action! Fun, for everyone involved right?<em>

\_As an author's note I would invite you to pay attention to the new characters introduced, they'll become a lot more important as time goes on and this story progresses. I certainly hope some of you keep noticing the Easter Eggs I'm blatantly dropping.\_

\_I took several liberties with how this chapter was crafted as far as artistic license for the Infinity. The entire dorm block for the Spartans is based on a piece of concept art used in the Halo 4 Commissioning Trailer.\_

\_It's good to be back. I hope you feel likewise.\_

\_If you have any suggestions, plot elements, characters, organizations, and general storytelling twists that you would like to suggest feel free to drop a PM off. I'm already working on including some new ideas from one awesome individual. Reviews are

appreciated.\_

\_Before I sign off I must as always thank partner, contributor, editor, soundboard, and best-est friend ever **\*\*gwb99 \*\***for his work in my writing.

><em>

\_Yours in writing,\_

**\*\*\_theotherpianist\_\*\***

## 18. Chapter 18

\_Greetings! I've recently gotten to be a bit of a traveler as of late and just got back from a marathon of running around. It's always a blight on your travels when you forget your laptop at home and can't jot down any words electronically. I did bring a notebook though so I have this chapter and the next written down. \_

\_Your comments and reviews on the last chapter were most insightful. I do apologize for winding down the action a little bit but for the time being I'm continuing on this path because it allows me the chance to introduce new faces and lay down the foundations for future plot.

><em>

\_As always sit back, grab a bucket of popcorn (or whatever snack you desire) and enjoy.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 18<p>

**\*\*Galaxies Opera House,\*\***

**\*\*Uscru Entertainment District, Galactic City, 21:28:00 Hours Local Time,**  
><strong>

**\*\*Coruscant\*\***

"We're here." Dax Ordo muttered as he parked their speeder in an out of the way location on top of the roof.

"Have you thought about security patrols?" Zek asked as he dismounted sweeping the cloak over him covering his weapons.

Dax gave a snort. "They don't put that much security up here because nobody would be this stupid to try and sneak in up here."

"Why's that?"

The sloping dome they were walking on suddenly dropped into the sea of swirling traffic, light, and sound that made up Coruscant. Another step and he would have fallen down the slick edge to certain death.

"That's why." Dax said pulling him back. "That and there's nothing on the surface about an opera house worth stealing. There's an



ventilation unit over there we can sneak in through." he said pointing out of a large grate that was sent into the side of another dome. "Now how do we get there?"

Zek snorted as Dax pondered how to solve his problem. With a few steps and a massive leap he scaled the distance without any problem. He looked back and saw an amused looking Dax looking back. He pulled something out of a bag and seconds later a grappling hook hit the side of the dome anchoring it. He gave his own running leap and disappeared. He emerged into sight again in a few seconds as he climbed the rope. When he reached the top he collected it and replaced it within the bag he was carrying.

"Didn't know you could pull that type of stunt." he grunted approvingly.

"All of my kind can do this and more. Some of the more athletic ones can go farther. You have a plan to get in?"

Dax took a hold of the grate and with an effort pulled it out of its place.

"Go ahead." he gestured.

Zek stepped inside and almost fell as he stepped to a step drop. Hot air was being thrown against his face and it felt akin to an oven.

"You're going to have to lower yourself down somehow. It's only 12 feet but it's enough.

"Fine then." Zek said and he dropped down. He hit the ground seconds later and rolled forward into an alcove of sorts. Dax joined him a minute later.

"Had to set our escape route." he explained.

"Fine. It's too hot up here."

He gestured to another grate in the floor below in another passage.

"That's our egress. Careful not to make any noise though. Nobody should be out in the hall but you never know what drama plays out outside the opera during the show.

"Been here much?"

"Yeah. I hide out all sorts of stuff here. The guy we met at the bar introduced it to me. Nice place really. The upper class are way too lax and arrogant. They'd never find us or our stuff. Had to park somewhere different though because I almost got caught last time."

He removed the grate from the floor and stuck a head down.

"We're clear." and he dropped to the floor.

Zek followed him and kept a hand on his Plasma pistol just in case. Dax pointed out to him the cameras they came across and they went

well out of their way to avoid them.

"The one thing I don't understand is why did he have to put it so \*\*\*\* close to the theater." Dax grunted as they snuck underneath a camera through a maintenance hatch.

"How much farther?" Zek asked impatient to be over with this errand.

"Not much-there." he said as they rounded a bend. They now had sight of a large glass window that ran up a long, slightly curving ramp that led up to the entrance to the theater itself.

There were several expensive looking stone busts interspersed between red, columns. Some busts were framed by fountains in front of them, others by foliage of all sorts.

"Which one?"

"Closest to us. Giant leafy plant. There's a hatch on the other side of that column.

"Well what are we waiting for?" Asked Zek who began to walk towards the aforementioned bust.

"What are you doing?!" Dax hissed and yanked him back just as a Security Officer came around the corner.

They instantly froze, concealed by the shadows. The guard, an aging male looked around for a few seconds then continued on. A younger one emerged from out of sight opposite him. They began discussing something intently and they stopped yards away from them perfectly content to sit and chat.

"Oh you've got to be kidding me." Dax groaned.

They waited for them to move but they stood idly chatting by.

"Can I pop 'em?" Zek asked unsheathing his plasma pistol.

"What are you nuts? That thing goes off and every audio sensor in this building will be triggered."

"Just a thought."

They were saved by, off all things, some of the drama that Dax had told him about. The guards attention was suddenly seized by a hysterical woman came running down the ramp with tears in her eyes pursued by a very confused looking man who was shouting his apologies to her."

The Guards ran off as she tripped and fell on the floor expensive red floor. They soon disappeared from sight and the coast became clear.

"Perfect," Dax sighed. "We need to move. Fast."

They emerged from the shadows and ran across to the column next to a statue of a beautiful woman who looked longingly at something behind him.

"Hey, as soon as we get this you can buy all the women you want after we get you off of here."

Zek glared at him but joined him behind the column. There was a narrow clearance between the column, them, and the glass window. Dax with some effort located the latch and part of the enormous column swung outwards to reveal a dark interior with a narrow winding series of stairs.

"Come on. In." Dax pointed.

Once they were all in, Dax closed the door and activated a light which he held up. They climbed until they came to the top of a landing where an enormous bag lay. He opened it up and grinned showing it to Zek.

"These are all 5000's. We're rich!" he began stuffing as many as he could into his own bag before giving the larger one to Zek.

A sudden thump shook the column slightly.

"What the \*\*\*\*?" Zek and Dax both said at the same time.

"You leave that here and I'll get our escape route." Dax said.

"How do I know you won't take it and run?"

"Because I need you so that I can get back to the Speeder. You're the only one-"

"Fine. Fine fine fine. I'm going." Zek said dropping his larger bag and descending down the stairs rapidly. Dax to his credit left the light shining down to illuminate his path. He withdrew his pistol and gently pried back the door. Something was against it so he ripped it open and shot the weapon as fast as he could.

He realized that the object he was shooting was already dead. The security guard, the older one they had run across, was almost non-recognizable due to the newly inflicted plasma burns. Something else had killed him. He heard a wet squelch as he pushed him away and saw a pool of blood where the knife that had killed him lay buried in his heart. The other guard lay close to him with his neck at an odd angle.

"They're dead!" he shouted.

"What? Who!"

"The guards, something killed them!"

He joined Zek in staring at the dead guard until they heard soft rushing footfalls coming towards them.

He said something in his native tongue that sounded suspiciously like a curse.

"This isn't good. We need to go. Up the stairs now!"

"And where exactly do they lead?" Zek asked snidely.

"Catwalk, it lead's us to a place where holofilm crews used to record the operas and ballets."

"And where are they?"

"Not here tonight."

They both burst up onto the top of the columns staircase with Dax still holding their light. The glow illuminated off a door at the end of the chamber.

"Through here!" Dax whispered hoarsely.

The door was locked and impassable until Zek shorted out the doors electronic locks with an overcharged plasma pistol shot. It opened with a muffled bang as Zek threw his cloak in front of it to muffle the sound somewhat. They burst into a wide, shadow filled room that had perfect visibility over the entire circular theater. The sound of music and singing instantly muffled out everything. Zek closed the door as best as he could and scanned for an exit.

That was when he caught sight of the assassin.

"Look! Over there!" he called out.

"What is it?" Dax said drawing out his own blaster.

"Over there! On the railing, what is that?" Zek asked. Standing at the edge of a circular railing impossibly high was a black figure clutching a rifle.

"Is that an Assassin droid?" Dax asked trying to make out the figure.

"Who's the gun pointed at?"

"Well the VIP's box is right below us..."

The footsteps were almost upon them now and Zek heard the sound of something opened.

With a sudden burst of realization Dax dove for the exit onto the walkway when the door behind them slammed open and two figures like the one up high above them rushed in.

For a moment they stared at each other, red electronic eyes meeting theirs and Dax lunged for one blasting it over and shot one of them to the ground repeatedly effectively destroying it.

"Get the other one!" Dax yelled as he shot the weapon out of the hands of the other one and grappled with it. Zek rushed out the side of the room and unsheathed his needle rifle.

With a single fluid motion he brought it to bear on the droid and fired. A single crystalline ringing sound drowned out the orchestra for a second and the people still unaware of what was going on.

He saw the six inch jagged projectile explode outwards in a purple flash. It traveled across the distance of the hall in seconds,

passing over the heads of the audience, of the performers, until it suddenly slammed into the droid and shatter with a noise of cracking and shattering glass. No effect.

The droid suddenly diverted its attention to its target to Zek and fired. The bolt missed him barely as he dove out of the way. This time he fire three more times. Three more times it slammed into the head but this time stuck.

With a sudden purple explosion and sound of many breaking glasses the droid burst apart as the jagged shards and fragments of blamite crystals exploded every which way.

The audience took note this time and screamed as they realized they were in the middle of a firefight and tried to rush the doors all at once. The opera singers were the loudest as they transitioned from singing to screaming.

Between the chaos and the purple mist, Zek did not see the rocket flying straight at them until it was almost on top of them.

"Move!" Zek yelled as he dove away from the explosive.

Dax rolled out of the way just in time as the floor underneath where he lay exploded in a cloud of dust and rubble. The droid he had been fighting nothing more than small bits. Zek felt himself go temporarily deaf as the concussion punched through his body and exited to shake the rest of the room.

Another two droids suddenly appeared on the Catwalk running towards them.

"I got it!" the Mandalorian called out as he retrieved a small spherical device from his bag and tossed it at the enemy.

Zek rolled up to his feet and withdrew the plasma pistol firing it at the enemy as fast as it would allow. One of them fell and inadvertently kicked the small object back toward them as a high pitched whining sound grew in intensity and frequency.

Dax swore loudly and the rest of the undamaged floor blew out from underneath them.

With a loud crash everything collapsed into the floor below as the floor was incinerated and Zek bounced off the rubble regaining his footing as he rolled away.

He took stock of the room. The only people in the room were well dressed and struggling to remove debris that had fallen blocking the door. Two guards stood protectively in front of an again man in scarlet attire.

"Assassins!" a plump alien with fat blue headtails yelled scrabbling against the door trying to free themselves. "Please don't kill us!"

"Don't shoot!" Zek heard Dax moan as he rolled to his feet slowly.

"We're not Assassins!" Zek cried as the Red Guards fired at him. He

rolled and sprung atop of the pile of rubble activating a point defense gauntlet he had stolen from a dead Kig-Yar. The blasts were absorbed by a four foot glowing disc of yellow energy.

"Stop!" the man behind the Guards said and they at once stopped. That did not prevent them from keeping their weapons trained on the two of them.

"Here...let me explain." Dax coughed as he hobbled over.

"You two are thieves, robbers!" said another Alien noticing their loot bag.

"Guilty as charged." Zek snorted. "But we're not trying to kill you!"

A sudden shadowy blur dropped through the hole and rushed towards the group scrambling for the door. A blade in one hand thrust through the first guard's heart while the other clenched a grenade in hand. The second guard suddenly lunged with the gun ready to strike but the blur fired a circular object from a handheld projectile and all but the Chancellor disappeared in a sudden explosion of white smoke. It seized the man in red and started dragging him unaware he had missed two targets.

Without hesitation Zek drew the plasma pistol and fired an overcharged burst as the figure paused to grab his loot bag that had fallen away from him.

The figure dropped to the ground and oozed wisps of gray smoke and steam as the overcharged shot caught it in the back. An acrid smell filled the air as the plasma cooked the back and charred the skin black.

The man in red suddenly thrust his palm out towards Dax who let out a confused "What?" before he suddenly collapsed unconscious. He pointed his hand and the smoke cleared giving sight to the remaining guard and politicians knocked out by the smoky gas.

He suddenly pointed both palms at the ground and the floor beneath them gave way.

He swore as he suddenly fell again and seconds later was rolling as he hit the ground below. He looked over to see the man had disappeared. He turned his blurred gaze upwards to see the man floating gracefully down with the limp bodies of everyone else falling gently down as well.

"What the." He gasped inhaling as much air as he could trying to find his weapon. "Who areâ€œ"

"Now now, you won't need this." The crimson clad man said.

The plasma pistol just beyond his grasp flew backwards as some invisible force kicked it. The gun skittered and rolled out of reach by Dax.

"Who are you!" he demanded seizing the Needle rifle that had landed behind him and brandishing it at him.

The man looked at him rather bored but answered "I am Supreme Chancellor Palpatine of the Galactic Republic."

"Wait, you're the Chancellor?" He looked at the ceiling above him. There was a mound of rubble slowly arranging itself so that it blocked out the light coming in from the blasted hole. "How are you doing that? You're not a Jedi too are you?"

"Oh please." He said with contempt. "Don't group me in with that lot. The real question is who are you?"

"I'm not answering anything." Zek said getting to his feet hoisting his bag of loot over his back and pointing his gun with one hand. "I'm just going to take this and forget I ever saw you."

"Oh really Zek Lhar?"

He froze suddenly and panic set over him. The man's face had changed. There was something he had seen in the faces of many his scheming brethren, in the faces of individuals like Jul 'Mdama and the late Hierarchs of the Covenant Empire.

"How do you know that?" he asked backing away slowly.

"Your mind is as easy to read as an open book. My myâ€¦you have so much anger within."

Zek continued to backtrack slowly. This man, Chancellor or not, did not need to know the details of his life. Ignorance was what kept him alive. Appearing so insignificant that he practically vanished was one of his specialties. And now this man was stripping that away from him.

"Tell me more about why you hate the Sangheili, I do believe that is what they are called no?"

"That's none of your business." he snapped.

The man gave him a kindly smile. "Really now, I'd much rather you answer me honestly. You cannot hide these things from me. It would be much easier for all of us if you were to-"

Zek answered by dropping his loot and shooting at the Chancellor with his rifle. The needle missed millimeters from his head. He shot again and this time the needle flew by on the other side.

Enraged he emptied the magazine at him but again met with no results. He looked up from the scope and to his astonishment saw that the Chancellor had every single projectile surrounding him in a purple cocoon. They suddenly all exploded and the Chancellor still remained unharmed where any normal person would have been torn to a bloody pulp.

He began to laugh. "Good! Good!" he said approvingly. "Your hatred gives you strength. Give into it! Strike me down, I am defenseless."

He dropped the gun and sprang at the Chancellor. The Chancellor sidestepped so quickly that Zek went sprawling as he tackled air. He was suddenly conscious of being lifted off his feet and his all his

nerves flared to life as an electricity blasted all across his body from the man to him.

How was this possible? he faintly wondered as he writhed under an electric current.

The man began to laugh as he watched Zek begin to writhe under the torrent of electricity seemingly generated from no where.

The pain suddenly stopped and he hit the ground and Zek's eyes and tiny pinpricks of light exploded in his vision as he hit the ground.

"You Jedi scum!" Zek gasped as he picked his head off the ground exhausted.

"I told you I was not a Jedi. Have I lied to you yet?"

Zek gave no answer, too stunned to respond.

"I think," the Chancellor said regarding his hand with some interest "the time for games is over. Now tell me Zek Lhar. Why regard your allies with such hatred?"

"If you think that I'm going to justâ€œ"

A sudden burst of invisible energy blasted him from his feet and pinned against the wall. A clamp seized around his throat and he found it impossible to breathe. The Chancellor moved closer with a furrowed brow.

He was suddenly released and he collapsed to the ground coughing.

"Would you like to try again?"

"You!" he spluttered enraged. "You just think that you can abuse me like this? Do you treat all your citizens like this?! Once they know"

The man began to cackle again. "You should know that I am accustomed to getting what I want, Zek Lhar." He said the last two words so silky smooth that it caused a shiver to run down his back. "You have run away have you not? Nobody would care what happens to a runaway pirate. Now. Tell me, why do you hate your allies?"

"Fine!" Zek screamed his composure broken. "You want to know why I hate them? I hate them for what they did to my family! What they did to my business, my ship, my friends! Enslaved me to do their dirty work, treachery! Conspiracy! Blackmail! Torture! Why the \*\*\*\* do you even care?"

The man regarded him as a parent would an unruly child and Zek hated the Chancellor all the more.

"There is a way you can regain all you have lost."

"What?" Zek said weakly trying to comprehend what this man was saying.



"Does the name Darth Sidious by chance mean anything to you? The Sith?"

"Why should I care? No, I don't know him. What's Sidious to me?" he growled.

"Because Sidious can help you obtain what you want. You have lost much Zek. So much..."

Anger flared in the Skirmisher and he hated the man still even more for toying with him.

"You are a failed excuse of a pirate, a mercenary, a flawed assassin, your thoughts and feelings betray you." He said after Zek opened his mouth to protest, "But he can help you regain all that you have lost. You could also, with his help, become something greater than all of these."

There was something about his speech this time that was impossible to ignore.

"How?" he said cautiously. "Where could I meet him?"

"Do you not know of the power you possess within you?" the Chancellor said ignoring his question.

Zek actually managed to laugh. "Ha! Good one Chancellor. There is nothing special about me. Hate to break it to you this way."

"Oh but I disagree." With a twist of his hand Zek's garb fell away and revealed his best kept secret. The Forerunner combat skin gleamed in the little light they had.

"This armor you wear—it gives you strength, so much power at your disposal and you know not how to tap it."

Zek struggled to reclaim his cloak floating in the air. "The Sangheili experimented on me, tried to reverse engineer a Forerunner combat skin on to me! It gives me protection, that's it!"

Palpatine regarded this information for a moment. "No. Zek, this skin of yours holds power over the Force." He said simply.

"The Force?" he said blankly.

The Chancellor sighed as he heard someone attempting to breach the chamber they were in.

"It would seem that we have much to talk about in the future. Prepare yourself pirate, we will meet again soon. Do not speak of any of this and you will gain all that you desire."

Palpatine within a second had assumed a mask of fear and helplessness around him as Dax and the other politicians around him stirred.

"Oh my head." Dax groaned. He sat up and looked around. "What the—what happened?"

Zek kicked over the corpse he had shot earlier in a sudden burst of anger. The body rolled over to reveal a green reptilian alien. He

gave one long seething look at the Chancellor and examined the body of his deceased assassin.

"What the heck is a Falleen doing here?" asked Dax coming over.

He kicked the body over again to reveal a massive black sun plastered on an armband.

"Black Suns." one of the politicians said cowering.

"An attempt at revenge I suppose." the man in red said.

The crimson clad guard woke at this point and promptly pointed his weapon at Zek and Dax. The door suddenly flew open from behind them and they saw red trimmed Clones file into the room securing it.

"Freeze!" one of them ordered and Zek and Dax threw up their hands. "Chancellor is secure."

The man in red protested as he was pushed out the door but he gave Zek a look and he knew that this was not the last time he would see the man.

"Stand down! Stand down already Sergeant!"

The Clone in charge regarded him with some confusion.

"Sir?"

"They're the ones who killed our assassins. Have your men secure the building and let these two go. They've earned whatever they stole." he sniffed.

Zek glared at the Clones and picked up the loot bag but said nothing.

"On behalf of the Galactic Republic you have the thanks of the Chancellery and of the galaxy." said the man before turning with his guards and fleeing with the Clone entourage.

They waited until they were out of sight before Dax collapsed on the ground.

"Praise the maker! I thought we were screwed back there! What happened?"

"I killed their assassin. Come on, I've had enough of this place."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC INFINITY, <strong>

\*\*Captain's Quarters,  
><strong>

\*\*Captain Thomas Lasky\*\*

"Roland?"

The AI flashed to life.

"Yes Captain?"

"Have Fireteams Castle and Rapier made it to the War Games room?"

"No sir. They've gotten as far as the armory. The room is still getting set up. Are you really sure about this Captain?"

The Captain said nothing.

"You have visitors outside." said Roland.

A sharp rap at the door followed a second later.

"Enter!" he called out.

Two men and a woman, both extremely tall and pale entered inside and stood at attention.

"At ease Spartan Red Team."

He was in awe looking at them. He had the privilege of seeing the Master Chief and Blue Team on a few occasions but standing in front of him now were the three that had served on the Spirit of Fire.

"Have you all completed debriefing?" he asked trying to move the conversation along.

"Yes Captain. We finished an hour ago."

"How does it feel to be back in the present?"

"Permission to speak freely?" asked the woman.

"Of course."

"Sir, it's going to take a while for us to get used to everything. Thirty years is a lot for us to get used to and I'm not sure I'm okay with the idea of being friends with any Elite."

Lasky nodded.

"I'm sorry, I forgot to ask your names." he said apologetically.

"Jerome." the leader replied crisply.

"Douglas." the tallest said with a slight Asphodellian accent.

"Alice." the woman replied last.

Lasky nodded again.

"I've asked you to come on board to assist me in a matter that's close to my heart. Roland if you please."

Three chairs emerged in front of his desk and they each took one. The chair creaked slightly as it bent slightly underneath the weight of the Spartans.

The lights dimmed and a live video scan replaced the emptiness of his desk.

"Since the Spartan IV program has been introduced every candidate has performed admirably enough for the Project to be considered a success. Enough is the key word.

I've heard and seen enough about you and the other two's to know we could never create the saviors of mankind that you were. But we are trying. The eventual goal is to enable them to take up the mantle you've left them. However, I'm concerned that it's a mantle some are not ready to carry."

A holographic representation of a Pelican started playing on his desk.

"and unfortunately we've already suffered tragic loss."

The Pelican on the desk was suddenly swarmed by enemy AA fire. It veered in vain as it tried to escape but it was too late. It staggered midflight and fell to the ground in a fiery blue representation of an explosion.

"The first major incident we had was when we lost an entire team going to resupply a science base on Requiem, which, I hate to say, is the least saddening group of deaths we've had."

Other clips started playing, this time of live time feed taken months previous. In it a group of Spartans was being pinned down by Promethean Knights. One of them without a helmet suddenly took a round and vanished. The clip changed to a team of Spartans boldly rushing out of cover before one was cut down by a Promethean Knight.

"Others lost their lives due to preventable reasons."

More clips played and Lasky watched their reactions.

When he had gotten to a particularly graphic one he stopped.

"The Brass considered our mission to be a success but there's still the matter of all those deaths easily. \*\*\*\* even more recently we had one turn on his own teammates and killed them and nearly killed me. Around thirty are dead now. The others could have still been living on this ship right now as we speak. Critics of the program say that the IV's are nothing more than ODST's clad in MJOLNIR, not Spartans."

He stopped and looked up.

"Tonight we're running a full War Games simulation to showcase every Spartan with their combat talent. The odds are heavily stacked against two teams of Spartan III's. You are going to watch and tell me what you see. Tonight I'm trying to see the potential of our new additions but there's another reason why I've done

this."

"Captain."

"Yes Spartan?"

"Is it my understanding that we are going to be training them?"  
Jerome asked.

Lasky was slightly startled the Spartan knew what he was going to ask of them but breathed a small sigh of relief.

"Yes. I'm asking you, for the time you serve on this ship anyways, to help train them. Many of these deaths like I said were preventable which makes your job all the more important. If we get into another war, which I will remind you we are at this very moment at war, we'll need every single one of them.

Tonight I wanted you to see how they all work together, how they function, how they cooperate. I'm leaving many of the details of they are trained up to you but your job, should you chose to accept, is to make these Spartans better. I don't expect them to be like you in any regard, that's just something we can't repeat again. If we could prevent more deaths though, I will have considered this venture successful."

Lasky stopped and looked at each of them.

"Will you do this for me, for your brothers and sisters in arms?"

Jerome sat still for a long time staring at an image of one the Spartans being decapitated by a heavily scarred Elite. He looked over to each of his teammates before nodding.

"We're in."

Lasky leaned over.

"Roland, bring up live feed of the War Games room."

A screen emerged at the back and expanded showcasing them the map they were to be playing on.

"The Fireteams are entering the launch room now. The board is set Captain."

"Thank you Roland. You and the other AI's play nice now."

Roland gave him an amused look.

"You say that like dumb AI and an AI like myself-"

"Roland, F.I.L.S.S. was a gift from ONI, however frustrating you may find her.

At that moment F.I.L.S.S. interrupted them." Captain, the match will be starting in t-minus three minutes."

Lasky gestured at the wall facing him and the screen suddenly

displayed a closed circuit camera view of their board. The three Spartans adjusted their chairs and all sat awaiting the match to start.

They watched as the doors slid open and on two separate halves of the screen Fireteam Castle and Rapier walked out into an immense expanse. The terrain was not in their favor at this moment. They would have a head start and a weapon drop awarded to them but after that it would be a hard slog fighting through their comrades who were equipped with everything Infinity had to offer. If he were on that field he would be trembling as teeming hordes of Spartans punished the slightest error with instant "death"...again and again

"May God help them all." Lasky whispered.

**\*\*UNSC Infinity\*\***

**\*\*War Games Room:\*\***

**\*\*21:28 Hours\*\***

"This it?" Hansu asked as they approached a door.

Said door had a sign flashing above it declaring,

\_ROOM IN USE! NOW PLAYING: THE GORGE (F.W. SECTION 2B)\_

\_"Fireteam Castle, please proceed through the door and await further instructions." \_F.I.L.S.S. said obnoxiously over the speakers.

Will stared hard at the nearest loudspeaker.

"I pity the poor ONI organization that created her. Probably gave it to us to try and be rid of her."

\_"I heard that Spartan Gunther." \_F.I.L.S.S. said.

The team burst into laughter and William pointed a finger gun at the speaker and pretended to shoot it before he opened the door and proceeded in.

It was dark except for several blue lights illuminating a rectangular spot where they were to all stand. They all gripped the weapons they had obtained from the training armory above the War Games deck and waited.

The floor they were standing on suddenly began rising upwards slowly. Above them a door opened up and bright light filled the shaft they were ascending.

They reached the top and William's eyes took in the surrounding territory.

They were standing on top of a rocky bluff that felt exposed. Behind them was a sheer rock wall that climbed upwards at an impossible angle. If he had a jetpack he could maybe do something to scale it. To their left the bluff curved around and became a rock fall which one could scale with some effort up or down.

Opposite them the ground rose up some distance away and leveled out

into a small mesa dotted with several sparse looking conifers. They were good, sturdy trees though and would provide some cover if needed. There was also a great deal of rock that looked like it could provide an excellent space to set up shop if Rapier didn't get to them first.

"Well they picked a wonderful place for us to start." Felix snorted.

"Come on. Let's get off this rock." Will said.

"If we're going to fight out our entire ship they should have given us more to work with." Chelsea added.

Will eyed the weapons they all had. It was true, what they had on hand was not enough to fight in a long term engagement. The Quartermaster in the training armory had firmly said that they were only allowed to take two weapons with a maximum of six clips each. The grenade limit was capped at eight, special grenades and items would take the place of one of the grenades, and they were allowed three "power" weapons. What made the team the angriest was that there were not allowed to access Covenant or captured Forerunner weapons that the others would have full access to.

"Castle Three, see if you can't see what's going on at the other end of the canyon."

Hansu nodded and grabbed the only sniper rifle they were allotted. He hoisted the scope to his face and scanned the area way off in the distance.

"Are we on a Halo ring?" Chelsea asked confused.

They looked towards the Horizon and were met with the sight of part of the ring rising up into the sky."

"Uhh I didn't bring my spaceship on this one." Elizabeth said.

"Forget about the ring. We complete the mission." Asher said bringing the focus of the group back.

"Ralph, is there a way you can change the charge of the rockets?" Will asked looking to make his teammates busy.

"Change sir?" Ralph asked confused.

"If we're going to fight every single Spartan on the ship we need to do everything we can to even the odds."

Ralph took one the twin tubes of rockets slung over his back and fiddled with it for a second. A second later and the casing of the M19 102mm high-explosive, shaped-charge surface-to-surface missile popped open with a loud hiss.

"Alright, she's open. You're all going to want to back away. If this is anything like the real deal then we all have a chance at being blown up."

"But didn't the Quartermaster tell us everything was filled with some

sort of paint?" Brittany asked. "You'd probably just be painted to death, not decapitated."

Will frowned. His actual words were more like a macabre joke tying Van Gogh and bullets together but he did explain in detail that being hit by one of these rounds was not lethal but stung and made life challenging. Paint that hardened into rock and paralyzed. Really, someone ought to get a genius medal for that one.

"Hey Felix, come up over here and tell me what I'm looking at." Castle Six ordered.

The Engineer sprang forward and the two of them obscured the open rocket.

Will brought up his DMR and searched the surrounding area.

"How long is this going to take? We still need to relocate."

"Match starts in, t-minus two minutes." F.I.L.S.S chirped.

"Not that long, the question is a matter of how fast we can do something that could make this thing explode at any second. It looks like we can't edit the actual warhead, figures, but we could add some stuff."

Will lowered his rifle and the other three Spartans not doing anything spread out to watch the surrounding area.

"He bent over and saw the rocket indeed had more room. The heavy explosive charge normally found in the tip was replaced with a smaller purple block. The charge had obviously been changed to make it non-lethal. As a result the rocket only carried a small weight in the back to help balance out the projectile."

"I got an idea." He said after a second.

"Shoot Commander."

"How large is the explosive charge inside a grenade?"

"I don't know, let me see."

Ralph picked up a grenade from off his belt and examined it. He gave it to Felix who in a second had cracked it open.

"Careful now." Ralph urged as Felix exposed the interior of the grenade.

The charge, like the rocket, had been changed to a small rectangular block of volatile paint with a weight added to make the device feel like a real thing.

"I think that could fit." Will said.

With a steady hand Ralph disconnected it from the primer and set the block inside the rocket casing. A little finagling with the ignition and he sealed it up.

"Aww yeah!" Ralph said gleefully as he sealed up the rocket and



handled it. "This thing is going to have double the explosive power."

"What about the grenade Commander?" Felix asked.

"Put the extra weight in that one. It'll be a dud but if we get a few people thinking that all we have are dudsâ€|"

"We can use the real ones to greater effect!" Ralph finished.

"Pack it up though. We have little time to get to a better place."

The two of them started packing it up and Will gestured to the rest of them to follow.

"Match begins in t-minus one minute." F.I.L.S.S interrupted them again.

He led the way left and to the rock fall. Hansu reported after running ahead that there was a wall immediately at the top of the hill.

"Down or left?" Asher asked.

Will led the way down and they all moved quickly to the other side of the valley. He suddenly noticed that there was a well tread path that ran perpendicular to their destination. His eyes followed them until they opened up into a rocky arch that opened up onto a sandy beach. Beyond it an island with a jagged rock spire rose up.

"Think we could move over there?"

Will stared hard at the Cave and the island above. There were certainly places to create traps but the Cave looked like it was a good place to be trapped. The island beyond was tempting as well but like the cave something about it didn't give Will a good feeling.

"No. Let's see if we can't scale the cliffs on the other side. There should be a better place to take up residence.

"War Games commencing." F.I.L.S.S informed them.

"Elimination! Last team standing wins." Jeff the War Games AI immediately spoke.

A tiny part of the ceiling suddenly changed to reveal a clock counting down.

3

2

1

A fourth beep filled the air and almost immediately he turned his head and saw the barrel of a sniper sticking out of a tree with the rest of Fireteam Rapier gathered around in defensive positions.

"Sniper!" Will shouted and they all scattered as Rapier's sniper fired twice. The rounds nearly clipped Brittany but a quick shove from Hansu saved her from being dropped.

Hansu returned fire with a single bullet and Rapier returned fire keeping Hansu from taking more shots at them.

"Come on!" Asher urged them and they disengaged and made for the cliffs on the opposite side.

They traded fire with Rapier who was scrambling for a different place to hide.

Elizabeth was the first to get hit with the paint. Emily had sent another round whizzing through the air that only missed by another fraction of an inch. It exploded upon a tree and the "fragments" of paint peppered her left arm with tiny purple dots.

"Guys it hurts and my left arm is harder to move." She announced matter of factly before she was almost plastered by another round from a DMR courtesy of Rapier One.

"Can you pick it off?" Will asked as they began to scale the low foothills.

"It's hardened sir." She said after a minute of trying to scratch it off.

"I say we don't get hit." Brittany decided at once trying to help Elizabeth along.

"This paintball on steroids." Felix murmured.

"Commander, we got a ledge we can camp ourselves on 50 feet ahead of us. Lots of cover and rocks and we got a couple trees I can scale." Hansu announced.

"Roger that. Castle Two, take Five through Eight up and hunker down for a moment. I'll take Hansu and Chelsea to scout out an escape route."

They clambered atop a large outcrop that had much more cover than their original spot. It was also slanted upwards along the edge providing security from those who would attempt to attack from below. Several boulders large enough to conceal several Spartans lay scattered around and the two trees growing bravely into the side of a cliff sent its towering branches skyward. Behind them looming overhead another shelf of rock served to help create a potential trap for anybody who would venture up.

Will was more interested in having a backup plan in case they were overrun which, given their current circumstances was highly likely.

He crossed over to the other side of the outcrop and hoisted himself up a protruding rock into the cliffside and stopped for a second to make out any possible threats below.

That's when he saw their opposition.

"Uhm guys?" Hansu asked nervously.

Will zoomed in and took in the scene.

A large door had appeared at the end of a large beach and was opening upwards temporarily breaking the illusion of being on a Halo ring. Teams of four or five would stream in at periodic intervals and start moving slowly towards them.

"There are at least a Hundred coming towards us. Should we just raise the white flag now?" he said sardonically.

His HUD flashed with the image Hansu had just taken with the scope on his sniper.

\_"Oh crap." \_Brittany announced for all of them.

"I've heard of insanity and more insanity but this is insanity!" Chelsea protested.

\_"And we'll get it done." \_Asher said without any trace of fear.

"Even you got to admit this is suicide." Hansu said.

\_"There's suicide and then there's suicide." \_Asher replied.

A sudden whir jolted Will from his observation of his enemy and he spun around to see a pyramid structure emerging from the ground to his left. Multiple blue dots beeped into existence and Will looked over.

"I am officially not okay with this!" Hansu protested having joined next to Will.

"Let's go then." Chelsea said.

"Wait wait wait! This has to be a trap!"

The dots suddenly became weapon markers.

"So you're saying that the largest weapon drop I've ever seen is a trap." Hansu said dubiously.

A green icon suddenly flashed to life on his HUD over the pyramid which resolved itself into a 45 second timer.

"What do you think happens at the end of that timer?" Will asked.

"It disappears?" Chelsea guessed.

Will decided against his better judgment to go for it.

He raised his weapons and charged towards the pyramid keeping his vision open for any sign of a threat.

They reached the pyramid at 20 and fanned out. A gravity lift in the bottom of the base lifted them up into a massive second floor that

was filled with weapons and ammunition

"Quick! Grab the snipers and ammo!" Hansu ordered.

"Commander what's going on?" Asher asked.

"Christmas apparently came early." Will grunted as he began picking up as much ammunition as he could and throwing it onto his person.

"Get back soon please." Asher asked.

He continued raiding the paint rounds and started to think about what else he could grab with what time they had left.

"What do you guys have?" Will asked as he seized a Railgun and Sticky Detonator and grabbed ammunition for each.

"Lots of ammo for everything. I've grabbed all the grenades." Hansu asked.

"Commander the ammunition is pretty universal for all the guns we have here." Chelsea added.

"Hostiles are within in range of Sniper fire if you ever get down here." Felix announced from the cliff face.

"Get clear with what you have!" he ordered.

They dropped to the floor below via a hole in the floor and they cleared themselves away as the pyramid began to descend.

They emerged with their loot and began to pile it against a large boulder.

"Thanks for the ammo." Ralph said taking several grenades from Hansu and changing the charges on them.

"Everybody take something." Will announced as he dropped his load.

"Castle Three, pick a target and fire at will.

Hansu picked his way up the slanted rock and waited.

"Anybody want to join him?" Chelsea asked brandishing a sniper captured at the pyramid.

"I'll join him." Asher volunteered.

"I could use the Railgun." Brittany said hesitantly.

Will tossed it to her with the ammunition and she set up next to Hansu and Asher.

"Elizabeth, take the detonator and set up a couple traps for anybody who tries walking up here. Felix, you go with her." He said tossing the small weapon to her.

"Aye boss." Felix answered for the two of them and they picked their way down to set up an ambush for anybody daring enough to come up here.

He turned around as Asher suddenly fired a round.

"Nice shot." Hansu complimented. He then put another three bullets into the distance.

Will crawled up the incline to lookout over the valley just as they finished. He watched as two Spartans froze suddenly where they were covered with purple paint.

"Oh sweet, they do freeze up!" Brittany said with a laugh.

Nobody had seemed to notice yet that two Spartans were frozen. It was only when Brittany tried sniping with her Railgun that they noticed. William watched as her shot soared into a cluster of Spartans and promptly freeze two after they fell to the ground. The rest of the Spartans scattered and Asher and Hansu promptly picked three more off.

"Hey Will, the grenades have been changed out." Ralph announced from behind him.

"Roger that. Take something heavy and meet up with Castle Four. Send Elizabeth back up here as well while you're at it."

Will turned his attention to looking for Fireteam Rapier. They still had one team to deal with that was nearby. They could be a potential hazard.

"Where are you..." he muttered as you scanned the rocks opposite them. His eyes followed the contour of the rocks upwards to the rockfall they had climbed down.

A sudden flash of purple and he ducked down as the round passed over him. He popped back out and looked hard for the shooter.

Kevin's prone figure was flattened against one of the rocks in the rockfall. Will returned fire once and Kevin rolled away. Rapier suddenly emerged out behind many of the rocks and Will was forced to take cover.

"Rapier three o'clock low!" Will called out. Asher turned instantly towards them and fired with Hansu. The rounds missed as they were forced to scramble for more cover.

\_"We got eyes on Rapier!" \_Chelsea called out over the comms.

"Roger that Four. Castle Three! How's the enemy advance?"

"They're almost within range of our other weapons." He said after another successive three cracks. He threw an expended clip down and slammed a new one in.

"Wait! Scorpion!" Asher suddenly called out.

"Duck!" Hansu cried.

A sudden deafening explosion rocked their cover and for one frightening moment Will thought they would all fall to the Earth below. Through his scope Will saw Rapier suddenly drop their

offensive and scatter as they saw the Scorpion tank rolling up the valley with a protective screen of Spartans protecting it.

"How the heck did they get a Scorpion tank here?" Hansu asked incredulously as the tank rolled into sight of them.

It fired again and the rock cliff behind them turned bright purple.

"I got it!" Brittany said and she fired her railgun.

The round impacted the forward tread and it suddenly froze. The other three were still in working order though and the tank promptly changed its attention to her. She gave a little yelp and rolled as the round plastered the ground where she had been.

"Six do you have eyes on that Tank?"

\_"Uh yes sir. Working on getting a bead on it." \_Ralph said tensely.

Will heard the sound of the M41 fire and the tank suddenly stopped as it was encased in a massive purple blob.

\_"Ha ha! Score one for Castle!" \_Ralph called out. \_"Smart idea you had changing out the grenades."\_

\_"Thanks for taking care of the tank."\_

Will did a double take when he heard Kevin's voice suddenly break in.

"Rapier Lead? What are you doing on an our channel?" Will asked.

\_"Wellâ€¦let's be honest Castle One. Trying to fight you and everyone else, it's kind of unproductive. It's us versus them and we have visual on some enemies trying to flank you guys around the other cliff. How about we team up for the time being?"\_

Will allowed a small smile.

"Sure. Just be warned we have two snipers ready to freeze you into purple blocks."

\_"We know. We're lighting up our FOF tags."\_

Kevin, Julianne, Micheal, Emily, and Sophie all lit up suddenly in a structure that William was positive wasn't there before when they started. It was a tall tower with multiple windows allowing for an unparalleled view of the valley below set on the other side of the rockfall. A long bridge spanning both ends of the canyon allowed them access into their backdoor.

"When did you get that?"

\_"Just now Castle One." \_Kevin responded.

"Kudos to getting the better spot than us." Asher said grudgingly.

\_ "Anything for you Castle Lady." \_ Micheal said.

\_ "Micheal go back to spotting targets please. Targets trying to flank you are down by the way. " \_ Julianne said irritated.

\_ "Ahem." \_ Kevin coughed. \_ "We'll be in touch Castle." \_

The connection cut and Will turned his attention to the enemy tide.

"When exactly did they get so many people?" he asked as he began to pick a target and fire. The shields on a Spartan wielding a Fuel Rod Cannon collapsed and he fell to the ground frozen and immobile.

"I'm here Commander." Elizabeth said from behind him.

"Good. How's your arm?" Will asked as she joined on his left.

"Can't really move it. That paint is pretty insane stuff. Hard as a rock."

"Can you hold a weapon?" he asked frowning as he observed a large group of Spartans get to some decent cover.

"Yeah I can fire provided they don'tâ€"

She suddenly jerked back her left shoulder suddenly exploded into purple paint that swallowed most of her up.

"Oh my gosh Liz is down!" Brittany called out scrambling over to her.

\_ "Don't call me Liz." \_ she grumbled over the radio. \_ "This paint freaking sucks. Tag the guy already! Brittany I'm fine, get back to picking them off!" \_

Will scanned in earnest looking for the sniper as Brittany scrambled to pick targets off with the Railgun.

"Switch out your weapon Eight. I got a feeling we'll need it later."

She did so and started sniping with a DMR.

He found the sniper crouching on one knee and almost caught a round to the face himself.

There were four Crimson Spartans using a bulbous rock for cover, each with a DMR, Battle Rifle, or a Sniper and they were all waiting patiently for one of Castle's members to appear. He needed them to scatter.

"Castle Six I need you to get some of those dud grenades up here on the double!" Will called down to his team waiting below.

\_ "On it sir." \_

Will turned his attention to time being to focusing on the other Spartans moving cautiously towards them. They were in range of most

of Castle's armament and could finally see where their opposition was. Half of them was splitting off to deal with Rapier while the other half was trading fire with Castle. The air above them now hissed with purple splotches as the rounds soared overhead. They were doing a good job of keeping their flexibility hindered but they still had to contend with Castle's own ability to strike back.

The field was now becoming more and more littered with frozen bodies paralyzed by the paint. Will had finished taking two down when Ralph ran up next to him. He regarded Elizabeth for a moment before presenting four dud grenades to Will.

"This enough Commander?"

Will picked one up.

"We'll see. Two and Three! I need cover fire!"

Asher and Hansu promptly shifted their attention over to the Crimson Spartans while Will picked a grenade up, pulled the useless pin, and threw it as hard as he could. The grenade soared high into the air and landed right next to them. Will watched as they suddenly panicked and threw themselves away from the grenade,

Right into Will's crosshairs.

He fired twice but was frustrated when one of the Spartans suddenly spawned a massive shield of energy into existence as they realized they had fallen into a trap.

"What the heck?" He growled.

He fired over and over with the shield slowly becoming a darker shade of red. The Spartans all scrambled backwards until they were in the safety of another much larger rock. They would at least have to deal with Rapier now.

"They have shields now?" Asher asked.

"Must be something Infinity only has." Will grumbled.

"Commander we got a problem!" Castle Three suddenly yelled.

He looked over to where he pointed as no less than 12 Warthogs suddenly crested a rolling hill suddenly going airborne.

Hansu let out a curse and Will didn't even care at that moment.

"Aim for the drivers and gunners! Four! Seven! Get up here you'll be chewed out if they reach you!" he ordered and promptly hit one of the drivers in the face with a serving of paint.

Acknowledgement lights winked in his HUD followed by the reappearance of Chelsea and Felix.

Brittany's railgun fired again and one of the Warthogs suddenly careened left as the driver froze in place hitting another one and throwing it slightly off balance.

"What I wouldn't do for a Laser." Castle Six said wistfully before



grabbing the M41 and aiming at where he thought the Warthog would go and fired.

The rocket travelled towards a duo of Warthogs driving side by side. The drivers saw them too late and everyone dived out of their Warthogs as the projectile slammed into the first one causing it to explode. The second one now driverless flipped to one side and promptly rolled obscuring the Five Spartans from sight.

"Was that Majestic we just took out?" Castle Eight asked.

"No they're not dead." Hansu answered. "We just wrecked their face though."

"Keep firing! The other 'Hogs are almost here!" Will ordered.

Will had to forget about the LRV's when two beetle like shapes crested over the same hill as the Warthogs and oriented themselves towards Castle.

"We got Wraiths!" Chelsea called out.

The two Wraiths suddenly fired and the largest blob of paint Will had yet seen came arcing down towards them.

"Move!" he called out shoving the others into motion. "Go go go!"

They all flattened themselves as the shots soared into the rock below them.

"Can I say this is insane?! Who the heck comes up with this stuff?" Felix protested angrily.

"We still got the Hogs to deal with!" Will said turning his attention to the now much closer Warthogs.

"Forgot about them Will! We're going to have the path up here swarmed in a second!" Asher pointed out.

"Fine. Pack it up Castle! Fall back to higher ground." Will gave the command reluctantly.

He tried moving Elizabeth but the paint had evidently frozen her to the ground. He contented himself with her weapons and asked her again if she would be okay.

"\_Commander just go. I'll be fine." \_she said finally and Will retreated.

They all moved as fast as they could ducking beneath a hail of purple as they moved up the path. They scrambled backwards until Will and Asher planted themselves by two rocks forming a rough bottleneck. The others turned a bend to the left and planted themselves on top of the rocks looking down on the path that led up to their previous camp.

It was silent for a second as the weapons firing at them fell silent and the sound of the Hogs suddenly died away. The Wraiths had moved on to Rapier's position and Will wished them good luck silently.

His thoughts were interrupted when he heard a loud shout followed by a series of concussive booms and finally finished with an enormous pile of paint soaring upwards into the air and back down onto unseen enemies.

Ralph let out a whoop of laughter from above him and Will grinned.

The grin was suddenly wiped away as an enormous surge of twenty something Spartans charged up firing weapons at Asher and Will.

Will picked up all the dud grenades given to him and hurled them down one at a time while the rest of Castle opened up.

The duds soared down right into the middle of the tide which, like the Crimson Spartans, suddenly panicked and dove away from a explosion that would never happen.

It did give Will and the others time to rain purple death upon their foes. To their credit the Spartans put up an enormous fight but the first wave lay frozen after a few tense minutes.

"Anybody else?" Hansu asked after a second.

"Ammo check." Will said capitalizing on the momentary absence of enemies.

"I'm good on everything." Felix announced.

Chelsea declared she had a full shotgun she was ready to use, Ralph was halfway out of rockets and they only had live grenades left. Hansu had the least with minimum sniper ammunition and slightly more DMR ammo. Brittany was nearly out of Railgun ammunition and was relying on the Battle Rifle she had brought, Asher was fine, and Will had not expended enough for his liking.

Another two waves passed like the first and Will was beginning to wonder whether their strategy would change.

Will picked up the Sticky Detonator and fired it at a rock that encroached on their path. To pass they would need to get past that. No longer an easy task. The projectile hit the rock with a muffled thump and stuck awaiting Will to pull the trigger to detonate it. He set it down carefully and retrieved his DMR and waited.

The fourth wave was smarter.

When they all charged several Spartans had the genius idea of going first wielding those shields deflecting everything from small arms fire to a rocket from Ralph. Will theorized from their behavior that they were made of physical light. As he lobbed a grenade over the shields he inadvertently triggered the remote charge he had been saving for a more desperate time. Granted he didn't want to waste the limited ammo but it was still a small victory when the middle of the enemy column suddenly was painted in purple. It wasn't the worst thing they had dealt with but it certainly made their impossible job a lot harder. The shields winked out after a few seconds wherein they retreated and poured fire down their direction. Will had ordered the rest of Castle to stay in hiding for the moment to catch them off

guard. Just a little more.

The only thing the first two members of Castle said during any of this was calling out their reloads or warning each other of danger. It had been so long since they had last fought together but Will felt a thrill as he began to fight with her like they had before. They were all a team but Will and Asher together were a ferocious duo that turned the rocky path ahead of them into a killing ground.

"Watch your left! Rocket jockey taking a knee." Castle Two warned.

Will changed targets accordingly but he was unable to prevent two rockets knifing their way. He had to duck for cover and gave up valuable time.

The enemy surged once again and Will flicked an acknowledgement light three times.

At that moment the rest of Castle chose to reveal themselves at once flanking them and dropping six or more instantly. The rest retreated out of danger and regrouped.

"That's right you punks! Can't siege a Castle now can you!" Castle Six taunted from above.

"That's enough Six." Will said trying to theorize how to set up for this next wave. He could survive in a prolonged fight for a little bit more but at this point he would have to start making his shots count more and more. His ammo counter in his HUD said 248 but he knew that those would be gone soon.

"This time I want everyone firing. Understood?"

Green lights winked at him.

"You get the feeling that they're just testing us so far?" \_Castle Two spoke privately to him.

"Who? The Captain? Palmer?"

"The Spartans Will." \_

"Right, sure. I think they've been bloodied enough to know we're a decent threat."

"We've taken down at least 50 so far." \_

He nodded but waited for the time being.

"You guys ready?" Will asked.

A sudden force seized upon his throat and close of any answer.

"I am." said a deep resonant bass voice that was definitely not Castle.

A cloaked figure suddenly appeared right next to Will with a gun barrel to Asher's face and a knife at Will's throat.

\* \* \*

><p><em>War Games, close encounters of the Sith kind, and a cliffhanger. Oh my. Any guesses as to who this cloaked Spartan is? Closest guess gets a batch of cookies.<br>\_

\_Your comments are always appreciated and I love having reader input. It keeps my own ideas evolving into something much more than what it was before. Feel free to send me a PM. For those of you who are asking whether I will rewrite, I will. If I get time I will certainly rework the original chapters from before, but for now please enjoy the current story. \_

\_Before I go, many thanks are due to **\*\*gwb99\*\*** for his work in assisting me as a beta reader and as the guy who made me turn out a longer chapter for you guys instead of a much shorter one. All characters that are his are used with special permission and vice versa. I would encourage you to go check out his work.

\_

\_Peace.\_

**\*\*\_Theotherpianist\_\*\***

## 19. Chapter 19

\_Greetings,\_

\_I have returned from the depths of college applications to present with a new chapter. I try not to wait too long but I have little control over when I can get things out. While I wasn't able to post I managed to have Chapters 19 and 20 written on paper. Transcribing my own handwriting actually proved to be more difficult than I thought. The next chapter should be released soon. I regret that this chapter is shorter than the others but it will suffice I think.

><em>

\_Several of you made correct guesses as to who the mysterious figure in the last Chapter was. You'll know who you are in a second. Have a cookie.\_

\_In other news I have reached 100,000 hits and 300+ reviews on this story. A BIG THANK YOU is in order for helping me get this far.\_

\_Please enjoy the show,\_

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 19<p>

**\*\*War Games Simulation Room: "The Gorge"\*\***

**\*\*UNSC INFINITY\*\***

**\*\*Spartan William Gunther\*\***

"I am." said a deep resonant bass voice definitely didn't belong to

anybody on Castle.

A cloaked figure suddenly materialized into existence, right next to William.

Will reacted swiftly dropping down to avoid an incoming blow and then lashed out with two quick jabs at the Spartan's solar plexus. The blows connected but to Will's annoyance they did nothing to stop their assailant other than make the shields flare for a moment. An arm launched out at superhuman speed and threw William backwards into the rock hard enough to make his shields flare for a moment. He bounced back and his vision blurred as he tried to recover.

Through his visor he saw his Lieutenant Commander turn around and open fire but the other Spartan lunged knocking the weapon out of her hand. Her other hand went to her sidearm but he seized it and yanked it from her grip. The gun flipped into the air out of reach. The assailant caught a punch with its hand and caught the airborne M6, turning Asher's weapon on herself. Will struggled to his feet but was stopped by another hand brandishing a knife at Will's throat. Will recognized the large brute of Fireteam Shadow who now had both of them cornered.

Will froze, not that he personally felt like he had a choice with a knife pointed at him.

"How did this happen?" he wondered. It was a rare thing for him to have been taken advantage, he would have but this was exactly what was happening now.

"Well done sir." Will congratulated his assailant mentally. The pressure on his throat released but the knife still lay close. Real or not he was not keen on having his throat slit.

"Sloppy William. You call that being watchful? My grandma could have seen that in her sleep." a memory of SCPO Franklin Mendez's voice echoed inside his head.

Despite his precarious situation he began to laugh at the sudden flashback. He wondered what they would say to him now.

"Does defeat seem amusing to you?" his assailant asked.

"No, it's just been a long time since I've been in a position like this." Will admitted. "Kudos to you Issac."

"Flattery will get you no where." Issac growled.

"Hey! Castle One? Castle Two?!" Ralph called out from his position higher up.

"Don't you dare warn them." Issac said moving the the knife closer.

"There's someone else down there! Hang on Commander!" Brittany called out.

"If you fire your leader goes down with me!" Issac called to Castle Team who rounded the bend and turned on him. He moved Asher and Will in front of him as protection. "You would all do well to pay

attention to your surroundings."

Suddenly around the rest of Castle three more Spartans uncloaked into existence behind them with Rockets and shotguns trained on Castle. They had been flanked and completely trapped.

"Not so victorious are you now." said Horatio Fry with a slight grin in his voice as he kept his M90 trained on Chelsea. "Bjorn, Daniel, Isaac, relieve them of their weapons please."

Will had his weapons taken and tossed away to the side out of reach.

Within a minute the other enemy Spartans noted the lack of fire coming towards them and all came up to see what had happened. William and Castle stood in an uneasy standoff while word spread quickly of Castle's capture. Many of them peeled off hoping to finish off Rapier. Others chose to stay and watch their inevitable death by paintball.

Death by paintball. William mentally snorted. It would all be over soon and he could get out of this infernal simulation.

"Nicely done Fireteam Shadow." a gold and orange Spartan said followed closely by his comrades as they came up to observe.

"Thanks Fireteam Lancer." Horatio said quite pleased with himself.

"I suppose this is the part of the show where we surrender and are brutally painted?" Will asked surprising himself with how causal he sounded. "I'd prefer an artistic genius like Picasso or Van Gogh to do it but if you must--"

"Quiet." his captor snarled.

"No need to get hostile Isaac." Horatio frowned at his hulking teammate. "You know I got to give you guys credit. You guys held out for a half hour against all of us. Still..."

"So Horatio, if you could just hand over Castle nicely-" Lancer's leader asked.

"What? Over your dead body Taylor." Daniel said.

The gold and orange spartan stiffened and a standoff seemed likely.

"Quiet!" Isaac said moving the blade closer.

"Hey!" cried out another voice.

William mentally groaned he saw Majestic push their way up the cliff they were missing Madsen and Thorne though. Will realized they must have been frozen in the Warthog explosion.

"Why can't we have a piece of them?" DeMarco said pushing their way through Lancer. "They blew up our Hogs after all and I'm going to be feeling that bruise until next month."

"Uh I'm sorry where were you last War Games match? You left us to the mercy of Fireteam Eagle and that \*\*\*\*\* Wraith."

"You got a problem?" Hoya asked as he pushed his way to them.

Will mentally groaned a second time. They could have had Castle team on the ground converging on Rapier. They were being idiots. Will's frustrated mind cast itself back to his training. The current conduct of these Spartans would have guaranteed punishment of the harshest nature from Mendez. If Mendez and Ambrose could see them now he was sure there would be a coronary in one of them.

He sent a silent prayer out that this would all play out quickly and he could just fall asleep.

Well what do we have here?" Two new figures pushed their way through the already thick crowd. One clad in steel and orange armor clutching a DMR, the other in steel and sage brandishing a SRS.

"Back off Felix. We got them first." Horatio said annoyed at more visitors.

"Hey!" Castle Seven protested. "I'm the real Felix! The real deal! The real-"

Will flashed a red acknowledgment light and he stopped instantly.

"Shouldn't you be going after Rapier?" asked Bjorn standing over Brittany and Ralph.

"Well you know Locus and I thought we would just check in on our new teammates." he said mildly. "We just wanted to see the team that was the cause for all the frozen Spartans in the valley below. I must say you guys did an excellent job. Nearly took us both out with your paint surprise at the bottom. I'm sorry that we have to be on opposite sides. I'm Felix by the way and this is Locus." he gestured at his companion.

"And its time for us to go." he said in a voice more deeper and resonant than Isaac.

"If you ever need anything from Fireteam Charon give us a holler."

Will nodded as much as he could with a knife at this throat and the two of them ran off to fight Rapier.

"At least they were chivalrous." Will thought. He was trying to make out Asher's helmet from where he was held but Isaac did a wonderful job of making sure that nobody could communicate in hand signals.

"What a bunch of creeps." Bjorn said as soon as they were out of earshot."

"Next time I see them in a simulation you I'm going to put a knife in Felix's \*\*\*\*\* head. Maybe he could paint that on his helmet instead of that ridiculous thing he calls a skull." Daniel spoke up.

The team laughed at his joke but it sent chills down William's spine. He swore he knew that voice. But where?

"Hey Shadow, shoot 'em already and let's move on!" one of the other Fireteams hollered.

A series of winking lights flashed in his HUD from Asher. Will nearly cursed himself as he realized he had totally forgotten about acknowledgement lights.

"Do you have a plan?" she asked.

"Other than making a mad dash for freedom, no." he responded.

"Better think of something."

"I'm working on it! Trying to mitigate the heavy weapons."

"Quit stalling already!" Hoya called out. Fireteam Bailey and Jacknife are calling for assistance.

"Relax we got plenty of time." Horatio said unconcerned unsheathing an M6. "Who do we start with first?"

"Oh just shoot me already." Felix protested.

"Felix?" Asher asked dumbfounded. "What the-"

Isaac brandished his gun and Asher stopped.

"Uh. Very well then. You know this will hurt right?" Horatio said a little taken aback by his eagerness.

Will was formulating a plan as fast as he could but he had nothing in mind. He could always try to blitz his way out but that meant getting a weapon, and soon.

"Just shoot al-"

Horatio sighed and fired his pistol three times breaking the shield barrier and sealing Felix up in a purple coffin.

To heck with caution. Will decided. It was do or die.

Will suddenly gave a shout and with a single twist of his arm loosened the knife from Isaac's grip. At the same time Asher smashed the pistol from his arm and with the same move bowled into him staggering the massive Spartan before throwing the knife Will had tossed to her. The knife hit his chest and the brute burst into purple. Isaac flailed back as Asher's reacquired gun emptied out onto his body which promptly froze.

"Overkill Ash." Will said.

"Come on the others are in trouble." she replied .

There was a cry from behind as the enemy Spartans gathered tried to assist but Will and Asher were already gone having grabbed their weapons and dashing to help out the rest of their team.



Ralph and the others burst into action causing Bjorn and the others to panic suddenly. In a sudden in a feat of strength Ralph hurled a sizable rock at Bjorn who dropped to the ground to avoid being pulverized. His escape was short lived as the Spartan threw a punch at him staggering Bjorn back. Bjorn instinctively ducked and was floored as Ralph feinted and delivered an uppercut that threw Bjorn several feet away. He was almost on top of him to incapacitate him when Ralph's leg seized up and he tripped to the ground a moment after Horatio's shotgun shell grazed it.

Bjorn got to his feet and seizing an SMG from off his back prepared to finish off Ralph. He was stopped as Hansu came out of nowhere with sniper rifle in hand. He bashed the SMG from Bjorn's grip and without a seconds pause stopped Bjorn instantly with a snapshot.

"Catch Ralph!" he called out seizing Ralph's rocket launcher which was nearby. Ralph, who managed to get to his feet, caught it and saluted William.

Will opened his mouth to order him to stop but it was too late as Ralph dove off the rock face yelling "BANZAI!" before firing and painting the area behind Will and Asher purple. A second rocket froze himself and ten tightly huddled Spartans where they stood.

Had will not been running to put some distance between himself and the enemy he might have laughed. Ralph's sacrifice had given them a window to escape leaving the Four's struggling to react with the loss of ten.

As he charged up the hill he saw Daniel and Hansu crash together. The former knocked the gun out of his grasp and the two rolled around trying to overpower him before Horatio froze both by accident with his M90.

Four Castles down, four to go.

"Hey!" Will called out.

He turned to Will and Asher who both shot his arms and legs. The shields flared and his extremities became useless.

Horatio swore as he froze in place and Will regarded him with sympathy.

"Next time don't monologue."

Horatio nodded mutely and Will turned away grabbing his fallen Assault rifle and adding that to the arsenal already on his back.

"Fall back!" he ordered. "Castle Team! Double time it to the bridge!"

They obeyed without hesitation and Will saw a fresh wave of Spartans charge up firing at them. He paused only to toss a grenade and ran for the bridge.

"Rapier Lead come in!" he yelled switching to a channel he thought they would be on as he vaulted over a rock and rolled underneath a

fallen tree.

\_"Read you loud and clear. What's the problem Castle?"\_

"We're retreating away from a lot of bad guys. Are we able to fall back with you?"

\_"Uhh. That's a bit of a problem right now."\_

"Say again?"

\_"We got a hundred plus Sierras knocking on our door and they're not happy with us."\_

The bridge came into sight as they rounded a clump of trees and Will saw the tide of enemy Spartans trying to climb up the rockfall and engage them. Their only success had been creating a wall of frozen soldiers that was providing them cover fire.

"I have visual."

\_"Mind helping us out?"\_

"We're enroute now. Is there a back door or something?" he asked as he noticed the bridge promptly met a wall.

\_"Get closer and we'll open it for you." \_

"Roger that." Will said closing the connection and dashing towards the bridge.

"How the heck did we even get out of that?" Brittany asked as she turned around and fired a burst from her rifle before running after them again.

"The better question is how were we snuck up on?" Chelsea asked

"We can worry about that later. We need to be up there assisting them ASAP." Asher said.

Will was the first to run up on the bridge. He fired down at the Spartans attempting to siege Rapier and managed to freeze several of them before they realized there were additional enemies flanking them.

\_"Castle Lead be advised you have ten...twenty...\*\*\*\*! How many do you have coming after you?" \_Kevin gaped as they approached the end of the bridge.

"Open the door please!"

They were getting closer and no door appeared.

"The door Rapier!"

It still remained closed.

"Spartan Kevin, if that door isn't open-" Will warned,

A door instantly opened outwards in the side of the structure with

Kevin's IFF tag on the other side waving them in frantically.

Will crossed the threshold first. He spun around and armed the sticky detonator before firing. The projectile soared over Brittany by inches before landing at the far edge where Fireteam Lancer was in hot pursuit pouring paint down at them. He pulled the trigger and Lancer disappeared to be replaced by another team clad in brown and blue.

Asher, Chelsea, and finally Brittany crossed the threshold and Kevin slammed on a button sealing the door in an instant. Castle Four and Eight fell on the ground trying to catch their breath while Kevin turned to him helmet removed giving him an slightly annoyed look.

"You four are some incredibly lucky-"

"Where do you want us?" Will asked stopping the jibe before it could be said.

Kevin's face turned serious and he put his helmet on again.

"We could use two on the third floor and two on the second."

He looked at his teammates who were slightly frazzled but ready for action again.

"Ammo check." William called out.

His teammates quickly reported in what they had. It wasn't enough. The only game changing weapons they had was the M363 "Sticky Detonator" and Chelsea's M90, both of which were low on ammunition.

"I was hoping you had more but we can give you access to what we have but at this point every shot counts." Kevin said concerned.

"Thank you Rapier Lead." Will nodded in appreciation. "Alright, Eight you're with me. Asher you take Chelsea and head up to the second floor. We'll take the third."

Kevin nodded. "I've set up a bit of a trap here. Micheal insisted on using C12 but even if its paint filled I don't trust that much in one place." he gestured and Will saw all around there were dozens of unactivated mines all connected to a single trip wire that Kevin was replacing. "It'll give us some warning if they manage to breach here. Come, I'll show you your posts."

He turned and picked up his MA5K Carbine and led the way quickly.

Will followed close behind and they picked their way through the minefield. Beyond the front entrance it extended past the entrance and were spaced at uneven intervals.

"Watch your head." Kevin said as they came to a large opening in the left wall.

The corridor was covered with a massive blob of paint with many smaller splotches. This corridor had at one point been used by one of

Rapier as evidenced by discarded ammo clips and makeshift barricades made out of a couple ammo crates.

"Hey Boss." Will recognized Michael's voice as the Spartan rounded the corner, taking care not to reveal himself to anyone standing outside.

"Did you take care of the Wraiths?"

"Toast." Michael said hefting a Rocket Launcher as he turned around to head back to his post.

"Good work." Kevin nodded.

Will made his figure as small as possible and crossed the hardened paint. He sighted in a lone Spartan making his way to their former hiding place.

Within three seconds he was out of the fight.

"\_Rapier One, be advised the majority of our enemy is breaking off their siege of the front door and making for the bridge."\_ Julianne reported.

Kevin's body posture reflected instant worry.

"Do you have a fall back plan?" Will asked as they turned a corner.

"Well, it was going to be to fall back to your position." Kevin admitted. "Here we are..."

They all turned right then made an immediate left and they saw another member of Rapier crouched behind several tall barricades covered in purple.

"Sweet. Reinforcements." Sophie said wearily as she ejected a spent clip and added it to a pile at her feet. She reloaded and sat down.

"They've abandoned their siege here." She pointed and took off her helmet to breathe in fresh air.

"Helmet back on Rapier." Will said automatically. He suddenly froze as he realized he was giving orders to a team different than his.

"Huh?" She said slightly taken aback.

"You're still in a live fire zone."

"He's right. Kevin said awkwardly before she could respond. "Back to work Rapier Five, go upstairs and regroup with the others."

Sophie acknowledged and wearily put her helmet on.

Kevin showed them their cache of ammunition in the other hallway and allowed Castle the chance to refill what they lacked. He then lead the way to a staircase that led up.

"The second and third floors are mostly exposed but you guys seem to know how to deal with it. Two of you should join up with Julianne and Emily. I'm sure she would appreciate some help."

\_"As long as they didn't bring a curse with them." \_

"Really Rapier-"

\_"Relax Rapier Lead. I got room enough to spare. Just watch out for anyone brave enough to snipe at you. I got eyes on a few targets I could tag."\_

\_"Boss, we got multiple hostiles coming up on the edge of the bridge. They're hiding behind the rocks." \_Emily chimed in.

"Understood. Thank you Rapier Four."

Asher and Chelsea broke off as they reached the second level leaving William and Brittany to advance.

"I'll hold the fort down below with Micheal. I'll brief you on anything interesting." Kevin said before turning and hurrying back.

William climbed the remaining flight and climbed onto the roof of the structure. The only thing giving them cover was a few paltry barricades and a railing that ran all the way around.

"Oh this is fun." Brittany said cheerfully.

"How so Bree?" Will asked using her nickname. She was suddenly acting unusually excited for someone so introverted.

"We got perfect visibility of the enemy."

"Yeah, but they have perfect visibility of us." he said scanning for threats that could see them. He saw nothing so he moved up slowly.

"Not for long."

"What?"

He turned to see Brittany holding two oblong objects in her hand.

"Active camo?" Will asked staring at the holographic specter emanating from the two objects.

She clicked one and she disappeared.

"Where did you get that?" he asked when she uncloaked.

"Oh, I picked them up off of Fireteam Shadow. Daniel and Bjorn were \_not\_ happy that I grabbed them."

"I imagine so!" Will laughed. He took one and attached it to the waist on his back.

He mentally clicked it and the neural interface triggered the

activation mechanism dissolving him from sight. He slid behind cover of one of the barricades and uncloaked. He motioned for Brittany to come over and she did so at once.

"Thanks for the present."

She nodded and shouldered her rifle.

\_"Castle Lead, how copy?"\_ Kevin asked.

"Five by five."

\_"Excellent. Julianne is currently marking Team Leaders. If you can't already see, it looks like they're all trying to plan out their assault of the base."\_

A red marker flashed to life and Will looked to it and saw a small circle of Spartans discussing intently. He could have done something if he had a weapon that could fire at that range.

"Can she do anything about it?"

\_"Negative. She doesn't have a clean shot. Once she fires they're going to hide and the rest of everybody else is going to follow the bullet back to her."\_

"Understood."

A question just flared to life in William's mind.

"Hey, Spartan Kevin?"

\_"Yes?"\_

"How much does it take to trip one of those mines?"

\_"Uhh...I think Micheal said that it took 150 lbs of direct pressure, a bullet, or an electronic signal on them to trigger an explosion."\_ Rapier's Leader replied.

"Is there a way we can commandeer them?"

\_"Uhh yes. It would take a while to move all of them. What are you thinking?"\_

He looked at Brittany's camouflage unit.

"You guys got any rope or something?"

\_"Uh. I think we got some with the ammunition."\_ Emily answered hesitantly.

"Enough to rappel down?" he asked.

"Oh no. You can't be that crazy!" Brittany said in disbelief.

"Watch me."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC Infinity, Captain's Quarters:<strong>

"Come in." Captain Lasky responded to the rap on the door.

The door opened and Spartan Palmer walked in swiftly.

"At ease Commander." Lasky said from behind the holoscreen showing the ongoing War Games match. He looked up and gestured for her to come over.

"What do you think so far Captain?" Palmer asked.

Lasky stroked his temples and stared at her for a second. "The Spartans or the Games?"

"Both."

He hesitated before answering her question.

"I'm not sure what possessed you to throw them into the meat grinder so to speak but I think these Games are close to showing me what I needed to see. I understand why but at the same time, why did you set up tonight's scenario to be suicide?"

"You said you wanted them to prove themselves right?"

"I did."

"So I took the liberty and set up a situation to test them. Roland and I ran a simulation of our best Fireteams in action. Crimson, Majestic, Shadow, and Charon. In each of the simulation attempts they never attempted to ally themselves and they consequently were out of it within 28 minutes."

"And what's the time right now?"

\_"The current simulation time is one hour, twelve minutes."\_  
F.I.L.S.S responded.

"Well it's sure as \*\*\*\* working." Lasky grunted approvingly as he manipulated the camera bringing the screen to a tactical overview."

"Spartans William, Asher, and Kevin both demonstrate extreme tactical grasp of the situation at hand. They weren't necessarily supposed to team up but they know the meaning of the saying \_'the enemy of my enemy is my friend.'\_ Fireteam Castle's resourcefulness in changing the strength of a rocket warhead is to be commended as is Rapier's speed in positioning themselves to have the element of higher ground." Jerome commented somewhat amused. "Right now Castle Seven is either the most foolhardy Spartan I've ever seen or one of the most brilliant with his explosive sacrifice. Spartan Sophie also makes good use of cover and takes initiative on taking out targets."

"-but there's still the issue of Fireteam Shadow's debacle with taking them down." Alice interjected.

"Agreed." Lasky said wearily. "What do you have to say to that Commander?"

Palmer's face became slightly reddened but otherwise didn't show her disgust as she faced the Captain and looked him squarely in the eye. "I say that Fireteams Shadow, Majestic, Rhino, Ivy, and Talon will be berated for conduct and actions unworthy of being a Spartan on the battlefield. You have my word, Captain, that they will be punished for their immaturity."

He frowned and entertained the possibility that maybe something else needed to take place. He chose to nod and say, "Understood. Meet me in my office after this is over so we can...discuss it." He observed the tension that had filled the air. Things between Palmer and him were rougher than he would have preferred it. He knew Palmer held her Spartans to high expectations but he would need to speak to her later about some of his other fears. He still hadn't explained why Red Team was here. They were here to audit everyone's performance. Not just hers.

"What do you think of the model three's?" he asked trying to gauge her reaction.

She stared at the screen for a few seconds watching an arrow indicating Fireteam Castle's leader heading back to their stronghold.

"Some of them are certainly more audacious than others. I think they're obviously outclassing the four's."

"We expected that though."

"True."

"You know we are supposed to get a lot of new armor in a shipment soon. Fireteam Shadow's finally going to get the armor they tested and we're going to be able to help give the Spartans a competitive edge." Lasky said in a vain attempt to thaw the ice that was forming.

"The armor's not the issue." Jerome spoke softly. "You can armor them all you want but until they internalize what it is to fight like a Spartan they'll never be like us or the three's."

A sudden silence met the room.

"I apologize if I seem out of line Captain, but you've asked for my opinion. We will present to you our initial findings when we are done with this simulation."

Lasky nodded. Palmer suddenly looked shade more embarrassed and angry at the same time.

"So what do you have planned for the event that one of the teams is taken down?" He asked. "At some point one of the new Fireteams has to go down."

Palmer's face cleared slightly and she stood up straight. "If you'll follow me to the War Games overlook I'll show you exactly what I have in mind."

"Better hurry. It looks like they're about to make their about to make their gambit." Lasky said as the mass of Spartans on the other



side of the bridge began to move.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>War Games Simulation:<strong>

"I can't believe you did that." Brittany said annoyed as he climbed up the staircase and went prone next to her.

"Me too." Will agreed.

"You know you're going to get yourself killed one day? Right?"

"I didn't think you cared that much." Will said slightly teasing.

"Hey!" she protested. "I do care! I \_and\_ the rest of Castle care."

\_"She's right Castle One. Your more bold and daring plans haven't always necessarily work out." \_Chelsea added her two cents from below. \_"I didn't like necessarily being target practice while you sneak ahead and-"\_

"Thanks Castle Four." Will grumped. "Did we forget that we don't have the odds in our favor? How else are we supposed to beat out an entire army of enemy Spartans?"

\_"William..." \_Asher sighed below.

"I rest my case that desperate times call for desperate measures."

\_"William!" \_

"Okay! I'm sorry!" he apologized.

\_"Whatever Castle Lead." \_Asher said clearly dropping the matter for now. William noticed how she didn't use his name. Whoops. He'd have to apologize for that later.

\_"I just hope you set those charges correctly." \_Rapier Three quipped nervously.

\_"Eyes up! We finally got movement!" \_Rapier Four announced.

\_"Finally. I want some trigger action." \_Rapier Two eagerly said.

\_"Careful what you wish for." \_Kevin finished.

The attack was sudden as a surge of seventy-plus Spartans bore down on them. Fireteams Castle and Rapier immediately opened fire on them. He watched two Spartans freeze up as multiple rounds froze them into place. A particularly lithe Spartan behind them vaulted over its frozen allies and slammed an oblong object into the ground causing a fan of cyan plasma to explode outwards into the middle of the bridge. It served to make a roadblock but it also saved several more from being painted.

A Fireteam took the initiative and started launching rockets towards the second floor.

Kevin swore as the rockets sailed into the windows underneath and rocked the floor beneath Brittany and Will.

\_"Rapier, isolate the rocket jockey!"\_

\_"I don't have a sight on him! Wait, watch the grenadiers!" \_Rapier Five called out.

Will saw the two (possibly) suicidal Spartans charging at them and immediately started attempting to take one down. His target was evasive however and most of his shots went wide by centimeters. He watched as his target unslung an M319 Grenade Launcher used mostly by the Army and fired. The other one seized two grenades, armed them, and tossed them in a high arc.

Will's DMR ran dry right before he could take another shot at either Spartan, or the grenades. He frantically grabbed a clip and reloaded but it was too late as the three grenades went soaring into the second level.

Several members of Rapier swore before an explosion shook the building he was on..

"Report!" he called out as he and Brittany both silenced the Grenadiers with headshots.

\_"\*\*\*\*! Kevin! Castle Five's down and out! Couldn't move fast enough." \_Emily reported.

\_"She out?" \_

\_"Afraid so. We're down to four members."\_

"We'll distract them. Regroup yourselves Rapier." Will ordered as he deliberately uncloaked and stood making himself visible. The rest of the enemy caught sight of him and chose that moment to charge again. This time William and Brittany were the prime targets as everybody else struggled to regain control of their situation.

\_"Does anybody have something we can shoot at it with? Plasma gun? Grenade?"\_ Rapier Lead protested angrily as another volley of rockets caused them to hit the deck again.

"I got it!" Brittany called out. "Cover me!" she said pulling the Sticky Detonator off Will's back and aiming it. Will jumped up from prone and made himself a much bigger target while Brittany took a moment to adjust her aim for distance, and fired.

The sticky projectile arced slowly downwards with a profound sense of grace before sticking itself to the shield. The Spartans hiding it behind immediately backpedaled but it was too late as William pulled the trigger and watched as a Spartan on either side was frozen followed by two more that had been hiding behind the shield.

"Not bad." he congratulated her.

"Last one!" she called out as Will tossed her the last grenade for the launcher.

"Aim for the rockets!" he ordered.

She complied by shifting her aim and firing again. The final grenade soared over the heads of all and, in a surprising feat of marksmanship, stuck itself to the barrel of one the Spartans guns. The offending Spartan promptly threw it over the bridge and rolled but it was too late as the now airborne grenade exploded in a heavy shower of purple that froze a small cluster of six Spartans partially or completely.

\_"That's how you use a grenade!" \_Chelsea cheered from below.

A dozen or so Spartans, fearing more grenades ran for it and successfully made it to the foot of the door. The crack of Emily's sniper rifle was barely audible now over the cacophony of all the other weapons firing at Rapier and Castle. William grimaced. They should have recognized the threat was on two levels and divided their firepower between the two. Not overly focus on one side. There was now again so much paint flying that Will could not risk leaning out far to take aim.

In short, Will thought they were being overwhelmingly suppressed.

\_"Castle Lead! What are you waiting for?"\_ Rapier Three called out.  
\_"We need to blow it! Blow it now!"\_

The last Fireteam of Spartans colored in a woodland color scheme crossed the line of where he had laid out eight landmines stolen from their door defense trap. It had taken some effort but he had made four Spartans go charging out the door, engage in a skirmish to antagonize their foe, and kept up the effort while Will had sneaked up and laid eight mines on either side of the bridge and retreated back with his allies to safety. It was an interesting coincidence, he noted, the shape, coloration, and size of the mines made them look like part of the bridge. A part of him wondered whether that was intentional.

Intentional or not, so far no one had figured out they were actually walking right into a trap.

He waited a couple crucial seconds longer and gave the order.

"Hit it Rapier Three!"

A series of four consecutive explosions rent the air and silenced the sound weapon fire as each pair of mines exploded outwards and enveloped all around them in purple.

From his vantage point he watched as the farthest set of mines exploded creating a six foot barrier of purple behind them. The next two enveloped the back of the column of Spartans. The next two took out most of the rear guard on the flanks, and the next four took out a good dozen. Will had just succeeded in blocking the bridge and trapping them.

When the smoke cleared William was looking at an enemy reduced by at

least 25. There were now a good 30 or so plus Spartans still kicking and a greater chance of actually getting out of this thing..."alive".

"Oh \*\*\*\* yeah!"\_ Rapier Three spoke for all of them as the rest of the Spartans cheered at the aftermath of the explosions.

"Okay, that was awesome."\_ Asher admitted to Will privately.

He flashed a green light and she fell silent again.

"We're not done yet! They're trying to breach the door!" Brittany exclaimed. Frustrated they couldn't lean out of cover for a shot Brittany kicked the empty Sticky Detonator plummeting over the edge.

Will was unsure but he thought he heard the sound of a metal on metal impact and a Spartan cursing the empty gun that fell from the sky.

"Hey, Castle One? Can you lend some assistance to Micheal and Julianne? I'm sending them down to the ground floor to try and hold back the enemy." \_Kevin importuned him.

"Sure. Flak's too heavy up here anyways." Will agreed. He turned to Castle Eight. "Come on, let's get down and finish this thing."

They all hurried down and met Rapiers Two and Three at the top of a landing overlooking the door and the dozen antipersonnel mines still defending them. Will wished for a moment that he had the older version of the DMR instead of the M315. The older iteration could change between semi-auto and auto firing modes. He glanced at his ammo counter which read a paltry 38 rounds. He would be switching to pistols soon enough.

A bang on the door brought him to reality. The enemy was using something to batter down the door.

"Door integrity at 10%." \_Jeff announced over a hidden PA system.

"You guys have any more ammo?" Will asked already knowing the answer.

Both Rapiers shook their head. "Afraid not Castle Lead." Rapier Two answered for the both of them.

"So this is how the world ends." Castle Eight sighed somewhat resigned.

"You know guys, this was fun, I kinda wanna be done now." Rapier Three yawned. "We did good, kicked some serious Spartan butt, do you think we'll be allowed to sleep in?"

"Come on. We have 40 Spartans standing between us and victory." Will protested.

"And those Spartans have enough weapons to blow this place up." Micheal replied. "Face it, We've had a good fight but we're done. And even if we \_do \_take everyone out, we're still technically

enemies."

William's retort was silenced.

\_Door integrity at 22%.\_

"Well I'd prefer we not become enemies until this is all over."

Will turned around to see the remainder of Castle and Rapier coming down to join them with Kevin leading them.

"I appreciate the gesture," William began, "but aren't we leaving ourselves exposed to entry from the second floor?" Will asked.

"Nope. They threw too many grenades. Window's almost impassable."

The door gave a sudden shriek as it "caved" inwards slightly exposing the world outside slightly.

\_58%\_

"Castle, counter-breach positions now!" William ordered.

The four of them that were left shuffled and positioned themselves at the top of the landing with their backs adjacent to the corner for a possible retreat.

Will heard a shout from outside, watched as something was placed blocking the small hole in the door, and then a moment of silence.

"Incoming!" he shouted to his teammates.

"Look out Rapier!" Kevin shouted.

The doors suddenly blew "inwards" on some unseen hinge as an explosive charge threw open the door. The action had the unwanted consequence of detonating some of the mines closest to the door resulting in additional smoke and paint thrown into the initial shock and

Will sighted in a Spartan moving to capitalize on the shock and awe of the breach before firing his weapon.

"Contact! Contact!" he shouted as chaos began to break loose.

\* \* \*

><p><em>There you go, Chapter 19 is done. Chapter 20 to come soon.<br>\_

\_Comments? Suggestions? Ideas? Characters? Send them my way. I've already started incorporating some suggestions into my plan.\_

\_Again, many thanks to \*\*gwb99\*\* for his work and for his characters. Fireteam Rapier is the property of him and shared under a joint agreement. \_

\_Take care, I'll be back  
soon.\_

\_Peace,\_

\*\*\_theotherpianist\_\*\*

\_Please review and leave a like, many thanks to fellow compatriot  
\*\*gwb99\*\* for all the work he does in assisting me. \_

## 20. Chapter 20

\_Hey guys! \*\*theotherpianist \*\*is back. That wasn't too long of a  
wait right?\_

\_Consider this chapter the spiritual successor to the previous one. I  
thought a 16,000 chapter might be a little excessive so I split it up  
into two chapters. \_

\_Some of you guessed rightly in the last chapter that the Characters  
from Red vs Blue \*\*will\*\* be making appearances. RvB is a unique take  
on the universe of Halo that I feel should be incorporated.  
Unfortunately I must announce that for plot's sake, I will only  
include Felix and Locus for the time being. I will make you a promise  
that Freelancers, the Blood Gulch Crew, and others will be  
included.\_

\_Just one more foreword, this chapter includes some (in my opinion)  
overly cheesy/corny romantic fluff (I'm 95% sure that's what the term  
is anyways). You have been warned.\_

\_If there isn't anything else for the good of the order we shall  
begin.\_

\_Please enjoy the show\_

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 20:<p>

\*\*SpecOps Officer Barracks, Officer's Quarters, \*\*

\*\*CAS Assault Carrier Shadow of Retribution in orbit of Forerunner  
Planet Cryptum, \*\*

\*\*December 9\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* 2559: 23:02:01 Hours UNSC Standard Military  
Time/Calendar\*\*

Ripa 'Talam was in his room reading a holopad with a moving  
battle-plan from his clan's battle poem when a knock on the door  
interrupted his study.

"Enter!" he called out.

He rose to his feet and kneeled with one arm crossed over his chest  
as Fleetmaster Rtas 'Vadum walked into his  
room.

"Fleetmaster...welcome, your presence is unexpected."

"As it should be. Officially I'm supposed to be resting from battle but there are matters that are in need of special attention." He turned his attention to the battle plan.

"Tell me about this battle. I don't recognize it."

"I don't think you would recognize it. It comes straight from the Clan of 'Talam's history."

"Then please, tell enlighten me."

Ripa expanded the hologram to fill the room.

"We do not have a large presence on Sangheilios but we lack in size we make up for in skill and craft and lore. The battle you see before took place thousands of years ago. In those days my clan faced disaster. The 'Paran clan had been attacking our borders and taking our populace captive and forcing them to serve in their army. It was the practice of the 'Paran clan to take all that they subjugated and incorporate them into the army. This, as a consequence swelled his army to be one of the largest Sangheilios had ever seen in that region. The Kaidon of the 'Paran, Zasses, gave us an ultimatum to become subject to him to allow access to his greatest enemy, the 'Noblam clan, or to be utterly destroyed. Kaidon Thon 'Talam refused his offer and a month later Zasses meet Thon in an enormous battle that pushed the borders of the clan to 'Talam Keep itself."

The hologram showed a massive wave of red push against a faltering green border.

"All would have been lost had it not been for Zasses himself. In a move that showed Kaidon 'Paran's pride and arrogance he chose to not finish us and sent his entire army, with himself at the head, to 'Noblam territory to seize new land."

A red arrow bypassed the keep to invade a region of orange. While a keep in red suddenly appeared on the other side of the screen.

"Kaidon 'Talam chose in that moment to make a desperate strike at victory. He split up half of his meager army and sent it marching past the keep. The remaining forces saw the little group and left the keep to pursue them with all haste."

A red arrow suddenly chased the small army which was purposefully keeping itself tantalizingly close."

"Kaidon 'Talam then took the remainder of his army and stormed the defenseless keep. The citizenry hailed him as a hero as they captured the Keep and Kaidon 'Talam made preparations for an elaborate banquet.

The keep suddenly turned green as Kaidon 'Talam's forces took it.

"The enemy grew weary of the pursuit and fell back to the keep. They were shocked to learn that they had been tricked and they mounted a desperate siege to recapture the Keep. Those soldiers who had been

drafted turned on Zasses professional troops and they began slaughtering each other. All Thon had to do was watch. Those who were left chose between exile and death."

The red forces winked out of existence.

"Thon heard that that Zasses had captured some territory belonging to the 'Noblam clan and was heading home. Thon ordered the citizenry to prepare for a banquet with no expenses held back for Zasses."

The much larger red army returned into view on the holograph and entered the keep.

"Zasses, who was delighted to be entertained with a feast in his honor, accepted and ordered every official and swordsman to dine with him. The feast carried on for two days where Kaidon 'Talam ensured the wine they drank would be drugged so as to prevent his soldiers from taking action.

On the final evening when they were all gathered and preparing to toast the Kaidon, Thon 'Talam, disguised as an attendant bearing wine, pulled out his blade and thrust it into Zasses 'Paran. He then ordered his soldiers in and the clan of 'Paran ended that day. The rivers of wine turned into rivers of blood and after removing all those willing to join themselves to his house, burned the keep to the ground.

Rtas nodded and bent his head towards the floor in thought.

"Your story is intriguing." he said looking up.

"It is indeed a great source of pride in my family. But, Fleetmaster, forgive me, you did not come in here to babble about the great deeds of my ancestors."

"No. But it was a story with a great many lessons to be learned."

He closed the holograph and stood up.

"Officer 'Talam. I need your assistance."

Ripa stood up and kneeled.

"By my word Fleetmaster, you shall have it."

"I will warn you now that what I'm asking you to do is a dangerous task. You are aware of course of the Storm attack of Coruscant?"

"I am." Ripa nodded gravely.

"The Arbiter and I have both come to a consensus that they only could have followed us and known about the location of Coruscant through a spy. We have expressed our fears in counsel with the UNSC but we are treading a dangerous path. Should we have a similar incident it may drive rifts between us and a galaxy that contains more military might than all of us. They may be in a civil war, but the winning side certainly has the power to decide our fate."

"And you want me to find and expose this spy?" Ripa asked finishing the sentence.



"Precisely." The Fleetmaster said clacking his mandibles.

"Fleetmaster, I am honored but, is there not one with more experience in this than I?"

"Wisely spoken. There are those with more experience for sure. However, your, shall we say-lack-of experience is the very reason why I desired to speak with you. The very fact that you are a new Officer means that you will be seen as naive, gullible, inexperienced. But you and I know from your record this is not the case."

"You flatter me Fleetmaster."

"Do not let it go to your head like it did with Kaidon 'Paran. Now, I fear that this spy can only be someone higher up on this ship. You'll be given many opportunities to interact with them as an Officer. You may take whatever approach you want-within reason of course-but we need to root out this spy before more tragedy is placed upon our shoulders. We do not need any reason for the Humans to distrust us. You may call in whoever you desire to question including myself if you so desire. Do you accept this assignment?"

"I do."

"Then may the gods be with you Officer 'Talam and your eyes ever watchful."

They both saluted and the Fleetmaster turned to leave.

"By the way, as an Officer you have a fair amount of political and military authority. Do not be afraid to use it. You will also have several Assistants assigned to you tomorrow as an Officer. They will carry out your word without hesitation. As a final item, please do not reveal circumstances of your mission to anyone. Good luck Officer 'Talam."

The door shut and Ripa was left alone to contemplate the nature of this exchange. He was oddly reminded of William at this time. Maybe it was the retelling of the battle plan. The Demon always enjoyed listening to that tale. He mused on his lack of time to talk with William about the newest developments in his life. He wouldn't speak of his assignment but he certainly could ask for advice."

A chime on his holo-pad reminded him that he needed to train with the Sangheili under his command. Maybe William would be happy sometimes to show the Sangheili how much of a wake-up call facing a Demon would be should any of them turn out to be the enemy.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC Infinity, War Games Room,<strong>

**\*\*Spartan William Gunther\*\***

Will would have loved to have taken on an entire lance of SpecOps Sangheili, or a legion of grunts, or a dozen hunters. Anything but this. He was getting really tired of putting down Spartans that tried to kill him a dozen different ways.

They were in a rather precarious position at the moment. The initial blitzkrieg had almost wiped them out when the first wave had surged through with enough numbers that they had gotten within knife range. Castle Four and her shotgun were the only thing that saved them. They had retreated to the base of the staircase to the second floor and were trying to hold their ground as they steadily pushed forward.

Now Will was trading fire with a Fireteam that was doing a good job of trying to waste their ammo. Their plan fell apart when one Spartan stuck their foot farther than they needed to.

One, two, three, four shots later the Spartan was immobilized. Another four. Then six.

The Fireteam froze and William's gun clicked empty. William cast away the empty clip as the rest of the Spartans opened on another fireteam wielding what looked like the turrets of a Warthog.

"Props for ingeniuity." he dryly commented as they all ducked to avoid the withering fire.

Seizing their chance, a dozen more hurled themselves through the door splitting their fire up between the mines Rapier had salvaged from their door trap and the other Spartans hoping to split their attention. William reloaded and chambered his DMR in an instant prioritizing the Spartans taking out their mine defense.

The offending Spartans collapsed in a purple tomb as Will's shots met the head. In an act of desperation, the last Spartan threw himself at the mines sealing himself in purple and opening up a direct path to them.

With the advantage now in their hands the rest of the Spartans pushed cautiously in. The turret wielding Spartans went first advancing slowly. These Fireteams had seen the teamwork of Castle and Rapier and as a result were much more conservative in their approach.

"I'm out! Switching to shotgun!" Chelsea called out from behind him. She threw the empty Battle Rifle she carried and struck a Purple Spartan's arm throwing the aim off and saving Rapier Two from having to take cover.

She cycled the action once before leaping out of cover.

"Wait! What are you-fall back Castle Four!" Will shouted as she dove into the midst of the enemy.

Castle Four skirted enemy fire for a second before rolling into the middle of a Fireteam. They all flailed backwards trying to sight in on her but it was too late as three successive shots plastered them to the floor. The fourth member of the team was smart and dropped its weapon ducking beneath a fourth shotgun shell. Castle Four quickly shifted aim again and missed. This time the other Spartan caught a hold of the shotgun and started grappling with her for it.

From behind another Fireteam entered with guns blazing. Chelsea perceived the threat and swung the shotgun swinging her current opponent directly into the line of fire.

He lined up the closest one and fired twice bringing down the shield far enough for Castle Two to finish the job with a shot to the neck.

"Castle Four!" Kevin shouted suddenly.

"I'm with her!" Micheal called out leaping out into the action.

"Rapier get back-"

"Charge!" Julianne called out.

Will heard a very loud sigh before Kevin threw himself out of cover in a final act of defiance.

Two fiery orange Spartans dove through the threshold with knives drawn and with a single fluid motion Micheal was frozen as they slashed at his legs and then stabbed his abdomen. Chelsea sought to avenge their now purple ally with three shells from her shotgun. She gave an angry huff as they all missed their targets as they weaved around and past her guard.

"Cover me!" Will called out.

He threw the DMR on his back and withdrew his knife rushing into the action. He ignored the protests from his team and sprinted in leaping into the air and delivering a savage kick that knocked the first orange Spartan away from Chelsea allowing her to finally draw her own knife and duel with her foe. He focused his attention on the other Spartan and launched a sweeping kick that knocked it off its feet again. William didn't hesitate as he dove on top and stabbed downwards on the neck.

The blow was diverted by the Spartan's hand and Will struggled to launch a second strike while grappling with his newest foe. Will was sent to the floor as his foe rolled and kicked his legs out from underneath them. His foe rolled away several feet and sprang to its feet charging.

Will fumbled the DMR off his back and fired as fast as he could. The Spartan jumped at him, its own knife outstretched. Will heard his DMR click empty and squinted his eyes preparing for the worst.

Nothing happened. There was still the general chaos going on as Asher and Kevin coordinated fire between their two teams. He opened his eyes and looked to see a purple statue hanging over him frozen in the act of launching a knife.

"\_Too close." \_He said to himself.

He looked at his empty DMR and cast it away drawing a pistol before casting his eyes around. He regrouped with Chelsea who had just finished off her other attacker and moved back to cover. The turret Spartans had their field of fire cleared and they opened up. They caught Julianne in between their crossfire and Emily a second later as she tried to retreat.

"\*\*\*\*!" Kevin swore as he realized he was the last member of his time standing. Will looked over at Kevin and saw something change in his body language. He made up his mind about something and looked over at him.

"Get clear Castle!" Kevin yelled holding several grenades in his hand and pulled the pins one after the other. He and Will exchanged a brief salute before Kevin gave a war cry before leaping at the turret wielding Spartans who backpedaled furiously to get out of range.

They both rolled in opposite directions. William came up and watched as Kevin seized one Spartan and swung him towards the other before leaping atop of both. The grenades exploded and a massive block of purple formed in front of him.

"Kevin!" he called out.

\_"I'm fine. \*\*\*\* stuff hurts though. You guys deserve to be the champions tonight. Go teach 'em a lesson. Watch your back though."\_

He heard a shout and turned to see himself almost staring down the barrel of a gun of a Spartan that had tried sneaking up on him. He dove away at the last second and rolled inside the turret Spartan's guard. He wasted no time in delivering several punches to the abdomen and an uppercut to knock the Spartan on the floor where he finished him off with another knife kill.

He looked around to see no enemies coming at him. He looked around again doing a double take. Were they really out of the woods?

The lights suddenly went out.

"Well this sucks." Brittany said finally.

\_"Last Teams standing Round over." \_Jeff announced.

"Wait, what? This was just a round?! Who have we \_not \_killed?" Chelsea asked incensed.

"Please remain still." F.I.L.S.S chimed in. "Teleportation in three-"

"Oh my-"

\_"Two\_"

"Who's idea was-"

\_"One\_"

\* \* \*

><p>A blinding flash of light followed by the sense of being squeezed through a narrow tube and suddenly Will was standing in a new part of the room. They were in a small room with a large glass window running all around the edge.<p>

"We're being watched." Asher observed.

He looked at where his Lieutenant Commander was pointing. Surrounding them in the room peering through every gap was a Spartan, some with helmets on, some not. And they were all looking at them

"Can we just have a break from everybody ogling us?" Brittany protested.

"No rest for the weary Castle Eight." Will said sympathetically. He took in the room they were in. All around him in a giant square were 10 rows of rectangular pillars in a rough line spaced in even intervals. As he expected the pillars were high enough that they couldn't see over.

"Final round. Welcome Fireteams Majestic, Charon, Crimson, and Castle. One minute until round start. Please deposit all your current weapons in the receptacle and pick up new ones in the back. No weapons or equipment from the previous round may be used. Thank you." \_F.I.L.S.S chirped again.

A table appeared behind them loaded with M6 sidearms and ammunition. A container also slid out of the wall for the weapons they were carrying.

"I guess these are for us." Chelsea said dropping her empty shotgun and battle riffle in the container and grabbing a pistol and a few clips of ammunition.

Will followed her example and dropped all of his weapons in the box and grabbed an M6 and several ammunition clips and attached them to his person.

"Thirty seconds remaining." \_

"What's the plan Commander?" Asher asked.

"I'm thinking."

"Well think harder."

"15 seconds." \_

Will analyzed the spacing. They should be able to fit two Spartans comfortably side by side.

"When the countdown ends we are going to spread out into a diamond and cover ground slowly. Make sure to watch anybody who might try to mantle the pillars. If they don't polarize the windows look at them for visual cues on where they are."

"10 Seconds" \_

"Any final thoughts?" Chelsea asked.

"However this turns out we still proved ourselves to everybody tonight." Will said. "And the next time we'll be even better."

The rest of Fireteam Castle nodded and said nothing. They stepped behind a line that separated them from the pillars.

\_"Three, two, one, begin."\_

The viewing windows polarized and Will flicked the safety off his gun and moved to the left between the third and fourth pillar.

"Anybody notice our shields are gone?" Brittany asked.

Will glanced at his HUD and indeed saw a lack of shielding.

"It's a sudden death scenario. Any shot is potentially lethal." Asher replied.

"Quiet. Move up."

Brittany and Chelsea spread out to his left and right shoulder while Asher moved to cover their rear. They all took up positions scanning down the aisles as they moved cautiously.

"Turning up ahead." he announced as they came to the end of the first column. They turned crisply and Brittany moved ahead of William to scout ahead. He heard a cough and hit the deck as a purple shot flew over his head.

"Contact! Trace that shot!" he called out.

"But there was no need to as William's attacker made himself visible by firing at him. Fireteam Crimson, accordingly with their name were colored in a smoky crimson color scheme.

So they found Crimson. Majestic and Charon had to be on the other side.

The Crimson Spartan called out to his allies and opened fire on Will who was still on the floor. Will rolled belly up and fired twice. The shots bought him enough time to come to his feet.

"Four and Eight flank right! I'll take Asher and force them out of hiding!"

"Roger!" They said before taking off sprinting left.

He dove right to avoid three more shots while Castle Two laid down suppressing fire. He ran around the pillar and waited for the Spartan to emerge right into his field of fire.

The first and second one missed while the third caught the shoulder suddenly hampering the Spartan's ability to aim. He sighted in the head when three more Spartans burst out from behind their teammate to the right. Will dove right again behind a pillar. He mantled the pillar and then jumped from pillar to pillar trying to box the Crimson Spartans in.

"Four and Eight! Take them now!"

The two Spartans wheeled around behind Crimson Team and opened fire. The Spartans wheeled about to counter this new threat and sent paint pellets whizzing down towards them. Things went wrong when Chelsea misjudged how close she was to Brittany and bounced off her as she dove to avoid the paint. They adjusted their aim and Will watched as Chelsea vainly struggled to get away before she was made a frozen

purple statue.

\_"Ow! What the hey! Who invented this paint?!"\_ Chelsea's angry voice crackled over his comlink.

"Spartan down!" Brittany called out. "I need assistance!"

Asher in retaliation sent a bullet to the head of the crippled Crimson soldier as she sprinted forward to catch Crimson while William sprang from pillar to pillar attempting to catch the Spartans. His gun clicked empty and he loaded another clip. Crimson was trying to press their three man advantage against Castle Eight who was being backed into a smaller and smaller corner, so far they were doing admirably.

"Hey Chelsea! How much does it hurt?" she asked nervously.

\_"It just surprises you. It's not agonizing or anything."\_ Castle Four muttered angrily.

"Hang on!"

He managed to distract one of them and force the Spartan away in a different direction from Brittany.

This soldier was somewhat of a trick shot doing all sorts of acrobatics and incorporating bullets into them.

Will was debating how feasibly jumping from platform to platform would be when a sudden sharp pain registered on the side of his left arm. He realized he could only move it sluggishly at best.

Truly, the inventor of this paint was somewhat of a jerk.

He dove off the platforms and threw himself at the Crimson Spartan. The Spartan gave a distinctive feminine grunt as Will crashed into her and they collided. Will's momentum was enough that they broke through the pillar with an impressive sound of breaking stone giving himself a real headache.

"No no no no! Guys! Help here!" the woman cried out.

"Sorry ma'am." William breathed apologetically as he brought up his M6 and sent a double tap to her head. She gave an angry muffled shout

He seized her pistol in his hand and reloaded it running to assist Asher and Brittany...until he saw Asher running towards him with two pursuers on her tail.

"Move move move!" she yelled frantically as she hurled past Will. Will risked a two second burst of fire from his pistols before scrambling for cover after her.

He rolled out of the way as a hail of purple nearly took his life.

One of their pursuers broke off to engage William but suddenly disappeared as he (the Spartan looked male anyways) was tackled to the side. After a second the attacker was thrown across his field of

sight for a second before his original attacker emerged.

"So you're the leader of the Fireteam that everybody's talking about!" a male with a Spanish accent said as he fired twice.

"Are they really talking about me that much?" Will said retaliating with his own shots.

"They will be as soon as this night's over." he said moving and knocking Will's pistol from his crippled left arm.

"What's your name?" Will asked as he delivered a cross chop that sent his opponent reeling backwards.

"Lucas Santiago, my nicknames Inigo though! Anyways I'm Crimson Team's leader!" he flipped backwards to avoid William's shots.  
"You?"

"William, Leader of Castle."

"You seem like a decent fellow. I'd hate to kill you." he said as he recovered and delivered a heavy blow to his abdomen.

"You seem like a decent person. I'd hate to die." William said recovering his fallen gun and emptying it.

The shots missed all missed as Inigo dove behind a pillar.

"Then we are at an impasse I see." He said as they sprang apart.

"You guys apparently have a reputation on this ship. Everybody says to be scared of you."

"Well, to be honest you should. We are currently the reigning champions aboard Infinity."

"Ever lost to anybody?" Will said.

"Oh sure. We all have our bad days, between ourselves, Majestic, Shadow, and the new team Charon we're pretty close to a four-way tie."

"Any way we'd can add a fifth team that to that tie?"

"Well, you see, we really like our first place spot right now. And you'd have to deal with the other three teams. I'd honestly worry about Charon right now."

William sensed a presence behind him and twisted in a drunken weave around a circle as four knives flew at him in rapid succession. They all missed and embedded themselves within the stone pillar. William dove out of the way and took cover behind another one scanning for the attacker.

"You dirty cheat!" Felix called out as he emerged from behind a pillar.

"What can I say." Inigo said with a trace of a smile.



"An apology would be nice." said another voice.

Inigo was suddenly hoisted off the ground and thrown into the pillar to his left. Where he used to stand was replaced by Fireteam Charon's other member. Inigo hit the pillar and crumpled to the ground.

"Nicely done Locus, you knocked the fight right out of him." Felix said reflecting on the scene.

"Who's left?"

"Ah well we finished off Majestic, Crimson should be almost gone and we only have-

Will fired off two quick shots and Felix's turned back.

Felix turned and ducked to avoid the shots and Will ducked behind another pillar circling around slowly to attack again.

"You again?" he said and began to laugh. "Oh but of course! And to think I almost forgot about Fireteam Castle! Oh man! You guys just don't want to lay down and die."

Will popped out of cover but was forced to duck back as they both spotted him and fired.

"What's the matter? Don't want to talk?"

Either Felix was being intentionally provocative or he had a mental disorder.

Will took a different tactic and mantled on top of a pillar. Charon spotted him and they immediately took aim. Will leaped towards them and kicked part of the next pillar he landed on. His armored boot slammed into the instacrete and shattered it sending shrapnel towards them forcing them to dive out of the way.

Felix gave another laugh. "And you're unorthodox! I love it!"

William decided he needed to retreat and he set off as quietly as he could.

"You're prolonging the inevitable." Locus said somewhere out of sight.

Will reloaded his gun and poked his head around the corner. He could take two of them on. Maybe. He picked up a chunk of debris from the chipped pillar and hurled it to the side. It made a clacking skittering sound and he heard footfalls running towards him.

He saw Felix stop just before the next row and the sights on his gun.

He edged forward to his right and slide behind a pillar that he was walking next to.

\_"Come on. Just a little more forward." \_He mentally urged.

Felix moved into his crosshairs.

Will fired and Felix ducked and countered. Will raised his hand and felt a stinging sensation as his armor started locking up there. He swung his deadened arm as hard as he could felt the dull impact as he smacked Felix upside the head his arm froze in an outstretched position

The Spartan stumbled backwards flailing for balance and Will's gun promptly jammed as he put gun to Felix's face.

Felix recovered and he slammed into Will pinning him to the ground. Felix twisted his gun away from him and reached for his own. Will seized his helmet and pulled him flipping the black and orange Spartan over him and slamming him into the ground.

Will rolled as best as he could and fired at Felix's legs. The shots blossomed and Felix tripped to the ground as he lost his ability to move.

"Oh come on!" he yelled as William got to his feet and fired.

With a curse Felix sealed up in a purple coffin. He saw in his visor Locus behind with hands outreached. William jumped forward and Locus staggered as he lost his balance. Within a second Will was retreating. He tried reloading his gun but couldn't reach the clip on his left side. His arm was frozen and was blocking his way.

"Castle Two, are you out there?" he asked.

No response.

He decided to keep moving and buy himself more time. He was almost to the end of the corner when Locus burst through one of the pillars behind him. William dove to the left and ducked as he saw Inigo burst from cover and fire.

Will dove and rolled on his right shoulder as the paint flew over him and directly at Locus behind.

He heard a grunt and saw Inigo freeze as Locus's paint meant for Will took him by surprise. Will went skidding and crashed into another pillar. He looked up as he saw Locus approaching him.

"You have gone on far enough. This is where it stops." He said as he took aim. The trigger clicked and the gun's action popped open empty.

"Are you sure we can't talk it out?" Will said noting the empty gun.

Will struggled to his feet but Locus picked him up and held him to the pillar he had crashed into. He withdrew the knife and thrust it towards Will. He caught it and tried to hold back the blade with one hand. For all his strength he was slowly losing.

"You've done well only because you allied with the others."

"And you couldn't have?"

"No."

"Why not?" Will grunted as the knife drew ever closer.

"We're not even Spartans. We're not your kind. Why should we associate with those who are not like us?"

"I'm a soldier."

"You talk too much." He drew back the knife and made to attack somewhere else when Locus's body stiffened and froze. His face became enveloped in purple and he collapsed to the ground.

Behind him emerged Asher with helmet off in her hand, limping slightly.

"\_Game over!" \_Jeff announced and suddenly the lights turned to full brightness and the windows in the observation platform suddenly depolarizing exposing an enormous crowd of Spartans in various stages of reaction.

\_The victory goes to Castle. Resetting the War Games room."\_  
F.I.L.S.S announced.

The pillars that weren't broken retracted into the ground and previously invisible doors opened and an enormous crowd of people started rushing into the room.

Will noticed that his arm was suddenly not stiff but easy to flex now. The paint had "melted" off and was pooling in a pile on the floor.

Asher and William both moved together and wearily shook hands.

"Thanks for the assist." William said.

"Anytime." She said returning a smile towards him.

From next to him Locus groaned and got to his feet. Will offered him a hand and he pushed it aside.

"Hey. You guys are full of surprises after all! I think we'll all get along swimmingly."

Will turned to see Felix approaching him. He nodded and Felix turned to see Locus heading off by himself.

"I'll be seeing you around." he said before going off and joining Locus.

"They give me the creeps." Asher said as they left.

"Agreed. Where is Castle Four and Eight?" he asked.

"Right behind you."

The two female Spartans were walking towards them with helmets off.

"You know, I preferred our other armor better. More solid, more weight you could use to push around." Chelsea said examining her armor. "That's what caused me to die."

"Well I was ganged up on. It was horrible." Brittany shuddered.

The crowd was rapidly approaching and Will observed the rest of the team break off from the crowd.

"You did it! Holy crap we did it!" Elizabeth ecstatically cried out. She threw her arms around both of them in an outburst of emotion Will was surrounded by his teammates.

"A good thing at that too." Hansu said. "I might have pitched a fit if we had to go through that again."

The others were upon them now. Spartans he had "killed" giving him handshakes and words of congrats. Others stood off and grumbled. He would get to know them soon but for the moment he just accepted all of these things with thanks. What he really desired above all else to be in bed sleeping.

"Hey Castle!" Will saw Fireteam Rapier pick their way through.

"Congrats on your win." Kevin said offering his hand and William shook it.

"Hey, you know next time you guys are going to win."

"Debatable." Julianne replied.

"We survived because we teamed up with you guys ultimately." Sophie pointed out.

"But if you hadn't snagged your base we would haven't had a place to fall back to."

"Nothing wrong with that. At the end of the day it's still a win for us." Ralph countered.

"But hey! The entire Spartan compliment on board! That's no ordinary feat, guess we are the "superior" generation." Felix quipped.

"So much humility Felix."

"He's got a point though." Micheal nodded. "The night's getting late but we should still celebrate!"

William and Kevin exchanged a look but extended hands again.

"Take care tonight. Don't party too hard."

"Thanks Castle One."

They shook again and their teams parted. Commander Palmer suddenly became visible through the part striding towards them with Captain Lasky.

"Commander on deck!" someone shouted.

The room collectively fell silent and the Spartans assembled all turned and saluted.

"Well done Fireteam Castle. Well done Fireteam Rapier. You made history today." Palmer said approvingly.

"With respect ma'am we lost." Emily piped up.

"No. You didn't." Palmer said turning to face her. "Collectively as a whole you accomplished your objective which was to survive. This test was meant to see how well you work together with your individual teams."

"This War Games was also designed to help us see what you're made of. We are proud of what we see so far." Lasky added.

"As for the rest of you, you should take a lesson from them tonight. Tomorrow, circumstances permitting, we will release to you the after-action reports. Take them. Read up on them. You'll need the information inside."

"You've all proved yourselves today though. Go turn in your armor and get some rest. Dismissed." Lasky finished.

He turned around with Commander Palmer who began walking over to Fireteam Shadow who was hiding in the corner. The rest of the crowd began to disperse and mingle.

Will turned to his team.

"Ready to leave?"

"Hey wait a second."

They turned to see DeMarco walking towards them with the rest of Majestic in tow.

"You earned the Observation Deck tonight as part of the bet. Take it while you can, we'll be looking to take it back the next time." He said with a joking smile.

"Yeah, and open up some of that stuff we gave you." Hoya said grinning.

"Will do." Ralph and Felix chorused.

"How about we ration it out?" Hansu suggested.

Will exchanged a look with Asher and shook his head slightly.

"Alright Castle, fall out." Will said turning to lead them away.

With some effort they extricated themselves from the Spartans now chatting about the match and marched through the doors into the corridors outside and entered the elevator. For all the energy they had earlier, it was quickly replaced by a silence that nobody was willing to break.

The armor bay was mostly silent, some Spartans had made it up here already and were chatting softly. They exchanged waves and made their way to the ring machines and within a few seconds they had their armor removed by the technicians.

"You know," Will thought aloud, "We really ought to have a set of armor in our rooms in case of an emergency. If we were to all run to the S-Deck it would only cause a traffic jam."

"Where would we put it?"

"I don't know. Mount four mannequins in each room. We'd only lose a corner of our room."

Will kept his bodysuit on began walking back to their room. He made the trip swiftly and flicked the light switch on. He proceeded to his room and began to finish the process of unpacking. He didn't have many belongings of which to keep, just standard attire, formal attire, workout attire, he finally reached in and pulled out what he was looking for. He pulled out a heavily worn book with a leather cover stained by soot and carbon and opened up the pages.

"Still have that?"

He looked over his shoulder to see Hansu.

"Yeah." He strode over to an unlocked footlocker attached to his bed, placed it inside, and set a new code to lock it. He didn't shut lid but stared at the book for a second.

"I didn't think you have much time to do journal entries."

"Oh I don't. The ones I do make usually consist of mission reports, debriefings, and to-do lists."

They both shared a laugh and Hansu sat down to examine it.

"How long have you had that journal?"

"Oh since before I was a Spartan."

Will pulled it out again and carefully flicked through some of the pages. He opened up to the second page and looked at a photo carefully inset. Eight people were clustered around a hospital bed smiling.

\_They had been so happy.\_

His eyes diverted to the journal entry for that day

\_May 2<sup>nd</sup>\_, 2543:\_

\_I'm done! Sixteen times in intensive therapy and surgery wasn't enough to stop me. We're both done with our work (pictured above is my family in the hospital yesterday). Anyways, we've been talking and I think we'd like to take a trip, you know, do some fundraising. Lots of people have been affected by things similar to what happened to us. I think a charity concert would be a great way to show myself and thatâ€¦person how much he failed to break us. I don't know what the

future holds but these past few weeks have given me new perspective on what makes life meaningful. Up there, on the balcony, was I ready to die for her? It sounds so hopelessly romantic but seriously.

—

\_Who am I kidding though, \_

\_We may have shared adjacent hospital rooms and a traumatic experience but that doesn't guarantee reciprocated feelings. I'm fourteen with no idea on what exactly any of this entails. I wonder how she is doing right now—|\_

He looked up and noticed Hansu trying to look discreetly at his writing.

"Do you mind Castle Three?"

A sheepish look replaced the impish smile on his face and opened his mouth to apologize.

"Save your breath. It's fine." He said before his teammate could respond.

Will slid the journal into the footlocker and sealed it close.

"Who was she?"

"Who?"

"The girl."

William sat for a moment.

"Commander? Sir?"

"She was someone I knew. We—|shared a lot in common, I think we still do. One of these after I finally accrue enough years to retire I want to sit down with her and just talk."

"You loved her?"

"At the time I think I did. Then the war came and changed everything though."

"Was she taken from you?"

Will sat for a moment. "We were on the same Pelican that evacuated us but after that, I don't know." Privately, he did wonder how she was. Some day when humanity wasn't under the threat of some force trying to kill it he would like to sit down with her and just talk.

"If you don't mind I'm going to head up to observation deck. Might as well enjoy it now while we have it." Will said getting to his feet.

"Alright, I'll be up soon."

William turned and exited their quarters and turned towards the S-Deck.

The observation deck wasn't too far away. The signs on the walls directed him to either the left or right side of the ship. He decided. He retraced his steps back to the elevators he saw just before the armor room and waited for it to come to him.

"Look who it is?"

He looked over and saw Inigo walking with Crimson to their rooms.

"Well you managed to do the impossible. You guys are all one \*\*\*\* of a team. What branches do you all come from?"

"Orphanages, refugee centers, Pelicans fleeing a warzone."

The faces of Fireteam Crimson all took on a confused expression until Ingo's face paled.

"\*\*\*\*. You're a Spartan III aren't you."

"That's the job title at least." Will replied.

The elevator dinged and Will entered inside.

"Hey, I'm sorry to assume things." Inigo said trying to recover. "Tomorrow we should do official introductions. Sound good?"

"Sounds fine. Have a good night."

"You too."

The door closed and Will found the button labelled Observation Deck and the elevator started ascending upwards.

The car stopped several times to allow other passengers to board who paid little attention to him. The highlight of the whole trip was a scientists huddled over a datapad muttering random words about cryo-research in the arctic, and Mjolnir armor. He got out three floors before his destination and the door sealed close.

He finally reached the Observation Deck and the door hissed open. William stepped out and took in the sight.

They were currently orbiting Cryptum, green, glassy, verdant. None of the signs of a recent struggle were present other than the occasional piece of debris drifting by. There was a single solitary figure hunched over looking at the planet.

"Hey." he greeted.

Asher's hair fell over her back as she turned around.

"Looks like you found the deck."

"Looks like I did." He walked over to her.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Of course Commander." she answered.



"No formality please Asher. I'm just William, not Commander."

She said nothing but they both gazed at the planet below.

"Where's the others?"

"They're taking a walk. There's a hallway further down that takes you to the other side of the ship. I think they're just catching up. Hansu said he needed to run to our room for a second."

"Yeah, I ran into him. He'll be up soon."

More silence filled the conversation.

"How are you doing?" he finally asked.

"How am I doing?" she looked at him and directed her gaze to the floor. "Of all the questions you could ask"

"Well?"

She sighed. "I don't know Will. You tell me how it feels like to suddenly wake up in a different galaxy where the political climate here and back home is completely different, we're fighting Forerunners, and the world's just upside down."

They watched as the Spirit of Fire flew past them orbiting slightly faster.

"I'd hate to be those guys. When they went to bed we were fighting the Covenant. Now we're friends with the Sangheili and there's 25 plus years to catch up on." Asher finished.

"I guess I don't know how to help." Will admitted after a second.

"You already have Will" she corrected after a second. "thanks for coming to save me" she corrected after a second.

"I promised I would keep you safe on Corona to your parents. I intend to keep it that way."

She laughed and the sound was enough to allow a smile to show on Will's face. "I remember I promised you permission to come after and rescue us if we ever got lost."

"Do I still have that permission?"

She looked at him and smiled.

"What do you think?"

It was Will's turn to look away to avoid any unnecessary color in his face.

"Can I tell you something?" Will asked.

"I don't see why not."

"Back when you disappeared I had all the guilt of my failure to

protect our team come back. I couldn't face the possibility of having broken the promise, Asher. It tore at me; it still tears at me. Castle used to be twenty-four-man operation but then we had Reach, and Tylos IV and suddenly Castle was reduced to eight. \_Eight. \_And then when I lost you and the othersâ€¦I was a failure, I am a failure."

"Will, that's not your fault. You couldn't have done any more about their deaths on Reach and the refinery. None of us knew about the Navy's orders to literally burn the whole thing if we couldn't get it done within the timeline. I felt their deaths just as much as you. Let's look at me on Noble Team. What am I supposed to do about them?"

"You know Jun is alive right?"

"He is?"

"Yeah. I've heard his name tossed a few times. No idea of the conditions of the others."

"Oh. I'll have to get in contact then. But still, Jorge was right. We all make that one-way trip. Some of us sooner than others."

"But still. Do you still see their faces?"

"I do. They don't haunt me though. I'm of course sad they're gone, anybody would feel that way, they're in a better place now, you and I both know that."

He said nothing but looked at the planet, particularly at a thunderstorm that was brewing near the southern pole.

"Can I tell you something?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Some days...some days I just feel...horrible about what I've done. It's like I said when we dined with Majestic, I have a talent for killing. It's one that I don't like but I use for others benefit. I've hated how Colonel Ackerson used me as a "private grim reaper." and I \_hated\_ what happened on Mamore."

Will put an arm over her and she turned with eyes slightly watering.

"Ash, what is it?"

She gulped a couple times swallowing her emotions.

"I just want to go home." She said weakly.

"Go?"

"Yes. Go. When we're done with the war here, if we're even allowed to retire, I want to go home, I want to find my family, and just tell them I'm sorry for disappearing for the last 16 years of their life."

He gave a small squeeze.

"I know Ash. I want the same."

"Will? Do you think they'd accept what we've done? What I've done?"

"We've done a lot. What are you referring to?"

"Well...when we encountered them on Earth during the battle of Baltimore they...they didn't recognize us."

"Well, to be fair we were equipped with a pretty thick suit of armor."

"Yes, but would they recognize us now? We're not the children we were when we were separated. What would they think of me? I'm not cute little Asher that can play piano and not have a care in the world." she finished bitterly.

"Hey, come on, don't do this to yourself." he said

She repressed a sniffle, then two."

"You need a hug." he said simply. It was clear to him that she was nearing a breaking point.

He extended his arms and she buried her head on his shoulder and began to cry. Will moved his other hand to her back to comfort her. She remained on his shoulder for a few minutes while Asher released pent up emotion inside.

"You okay?" he asked.

It was a little weird seeing one of the strongest women he had known start to break down. He didn't know what to do so he continued as he was.

She regained control of herself slowly and Will removed his other hand.

"Thanks. I'm sorry about that. I'm supposed to be a Spartan...not some kid."

"Are we not allowed to feel now too? We're human Asher, human as much as everyone else on this ship and back home. If there's anything I don't want to lose, it's my humanity. Without I'm just a machine."

She laughed shakily. "As much as I hate to say it, you're right."

He nodded. "So what do you think of the War Games?" he said changing topics.

"Uhh...well, I'd be okay with not doing that again. I mean, it wasn't the most difficult thing we had ever done. I think taking out an entire Corvette was harder than this. I mean, we've done harder things like this before. It was the type of operation that you just have to get done and make it home in one piece." She said.

"You did a nice job leading today." she said as a quiet

afterthought.

"Thanks. I need to apologize to you though for recklessly endangering myself."

"It's okay, really William. We won, that's what matters. I just...didn't want to see you get needlessly hurt."

"You care that much?" William asked.

He privately wondered where this conversation was going. This conversation was straying into territory he was unfamiliar with.

"Iâ€¦uhâ€¦well. Yeah." She fumbled awkwardly. "Will, I've known you for most of my life. Are we not friends?"

"You've always been my best friend." he said automatically.

They both took sudden interest in the dull luster of the handrail while William mentally shot himself in the foot for being stupid.

"I...uhh." Will stumbled. "I mean you fight good and we've fought together and-."

"Just stop." Asher said with a trace of humor.

"Right. Sorry." he said.

Will turned to her and noticed a piece of foam sitting in her hair. How it had escaped his and her notice was unknown but suddenly it stuck out to him.

"You have a piece of foam in your hair." he said bluntly.

"I do?" she asked skeptical.

"Yes."

She ran her hand through her hair and missed it.

"Did I get it?" she asked.

"That would be a negative."

She tried again and missed.

"Here let me get it." William said bringing his face close to hers.

"Did I ever tell you what I thought about you?" Asher asked.

"Uhh. No?" Will said absent-mindedly as his fingers tried to separate the foam from a strand of her hair.

Without warning Asher suddenly leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek startling Will. The shock was so intense that time slowed down and the kiss seemed almost infinite for a moment."

At that moment the elevator chimed open, Will reverted to real time, and Asher suddenly pulled away so fast that Will only registered her movement as pain from his arms as she disconnected violently from him. The spot where she kissed him however burned with a heat that sent shivers up his spine.

"Hey guys." Hansu announced his presence as he disembarked. "Where's the others?"

If looks could kill, William decided he would have been court-martialed in a second. He withheld the look and only looked at his sniper briefly before turning back to the planet.

He risked a glance at his Lieutenant Commander and noticed she had turned a deep shade of red.

"They're on the other side taking a walk. They'll be back soon." Asher said barely holding in her embarrassment.

"Oh. Okay, I'll go look for them." he said turning and running down the hallway.

"For the record that never happened." Asher said still very red. From the intensity of her eyes William knew she meant it.

"Wait, what? Where did that come from?"

"William, it wouldn't work."

"What wouldn't work?" he asked confused.

"You. Me. Us. Together."

"What are you talking about Ash?"

"Look." she said suddenly flustered. "That was a bad move on my part. I shouldn't have done that. We're on the same team for crying out loud. No relations with subordinates or anything."

"But I didn't-"

"I just don't want...just consider that you're thank you for saving me." she said before turning away and following after Hansu.

"You're welcome?" Will shouted down the hallway utterly lost. \_Where did any of this come from?\_

They turned into another corridor out of sight and Will slumped on the rail. He heard voices belonging to the rest of Castle Team coming from his other side and he looked towards the source.

"Oh there you are. Where's Asher?" Brittany called out as they emerged from a corridor to his right.

"Asher's that way. I'd circle around to catch them. I think I'm going to turn in now guys." Will said unhappy.

"Oh. Okay then." Brittany said slightly confused.

"Don't take it personally. I'm just...tired." Will said failing to

find words.

"We understand Commander." Elizabeth said giving a smile.

"Yeah, go catch some sleep. We'll keep the partying down to a minimum when we get back." Ralph said.

"I'll make sure they don't get into too much trouble." Chelsea said giving him a wave off.

Will saluted and left. The elevator door chimed open and within moments he was descending. His lack of company gave him time to think. He had all but given up hope on any hopes of romance long ago. He was a Spartan now with a job to do. \_Love was for those who had too much time on his hands.\_ He had reasoned with himself.

This encounter was blowing all of that away. Was there a chance? Still? He had always reasoned with himself that people wouldn't reciprocate any affection. Especially her. At one point things had been different but that had been over a decade ago.

He yawned. He had a job to do and it resumed first thing in the morning. There would be no time for anything like that.

The elevator stopped, the doors opened, and he began retracing his steps back to his quarters. He turned to exit and watched out of the corner of his eye as Daniel and Issac from Fireteam Shadow turned a corner deep in conversation. He turned to follow them and tried to pick up on their speech.

"...I can't believe they won. Bunch of amateurs, the lot of them." Daniel angrily whispered.

"Well of course they had to win. They're a bunch of child soldiers." Issac grunted.

"There's something about those two that makes my blood boil."

"Ha. Which ones?"

"Castle One and Two. Call me crazy-"

"You are. It's William and what's her face right?"

"Yeah, Ashley or something like that. I hate her the most. Something about that \*\*\*\*..."

William froze and his anger flared but he kept quiet. He moved forward again straining to hear.

Will didn't catch anymore of their conversation as they opened up a door and proceeded inside.

\_So. They disliked him too. Well, the feeling was mutual at least.\_

Will made his way again to his room and found it empty. The others would be coming by soon enough, he was more interested in sleep than celebration. He keyed open the footlocker and took a few minutes to write in the journal.

As he did so he made his mind up and decided then that rather than focusing on the events of five minutes ago with Asher, he would instead focus on Daniel and Issac. He would talk tomorrow with his team about that. They would support his cause.

With this in mind he found the door to his room, opened and stepped to his bed. He climbed in and lay still and replayed the conversation with Asher in his head. However she had reacted, his cheek still burned where her lips had made contact.

Despite his anger with Daniel and Issac he smiled at the memory and fell asleep.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Aaand we're done. Hope this wasn't too much of a wait.<br>\_

\_Many thanks to those who beta read and to **\*\*gwb99\*\*** for use of his characters. I would highly suggest going and checking out his work.

\_

\_I'll be back soon. Next chapter is kinda open to suggestion as to who to include.\_

\_Have any suggestions? Comments? Ideas? Feel free to PM them.\_

\_Yours in writing,\_

**\*\*\_theotherpianist\_\*\***

End  
file.